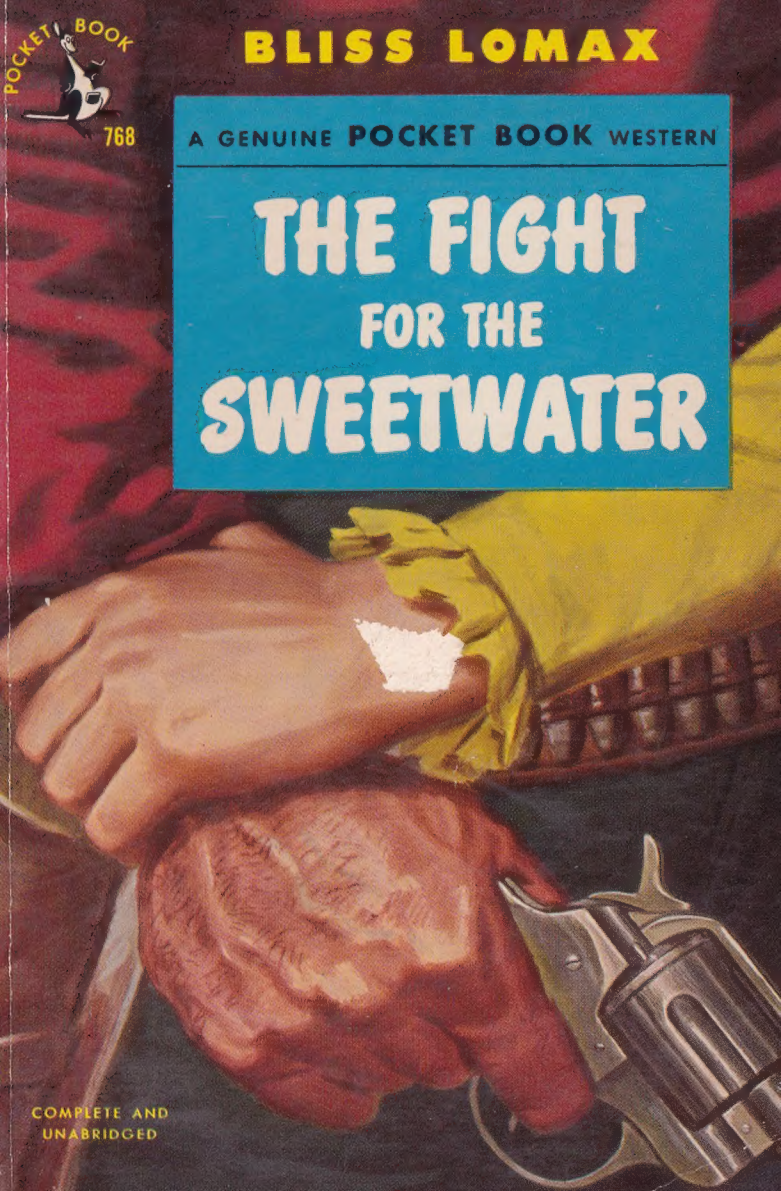

POCKET BOOK
768
BLISS LOMAX
A GENUINE POCKET BOOK WESTERN
THE FIGHT FOR THE SWEETWATER
COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

"GERTRUDE"
the Kangaroo trade mark appears only on genuine POCKET BOOK editions and is your guarantee of the best in reading.
POCKET BOOK

IN A LETTER Bliss Lomax writes, "I like to think that whatever measure of success I have achieved has come to me because I have continued to write about what I know—the high desert, the mountains, the winds that blow at timberline, and the men and women I knew when I was a kid."

That success Bliss Lomax writes about has been enormous and it has continued for twenty-eight years. Western fans know what they will get in his books. There will be suspense, hard-hitting, rapid-fire action, and a strong feeling of reality. Bliss Lomax attacks a story with vigor and enthusiasm and communicates his own excitement to the reader from first page to last.

The Fight for the Sweetwater was originally published by Dodd, Mead & Co.

THE Fight for THE Sweetwater

by BLISS LOMAX

Pocket Books, Inc., New York

The Printing History of

THE FIGHT FOR THE SWEETWATER

Dodd, Mead & Co. edition published March, 1950
1st printing .....January, 1950

Double Action Western magazine version published January, 1950

POCKET BOOK edition published January, 1951
1st printing .....December, 1950

The characters, places, incidents and situations in this book are imaginary and have no relation to any person, place or actual happening.

This POCKET BOOK includes every word contained in the original, higher-priced edition. It is printed from brand-new plates made from completely reset, large, clear, easy-to-read type

Printed in the U.S.A.

COPYRIGHT, 1950, BY DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, INC. L

This POCKET BOOK edition is published by arrangement with Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc.

Notice: POCKET BOOK editions are published in the United States by Pocket Books, Inc., in Canada by Pocket Books of Canada, Ltd., and in England by Pocket Books (G.B.) Ltd. Trade Marks registered in the United States and British Patent Offices by Pocket Books, Inc., and registered in Canada by Pocket Books of Canada, Ltd.

the Fight for the Sweetwater

1

SINCE early morning Clark Tinsley had been moving through these mountains, the uncertain trail so dim in places it could be followed only by guess.

He knew this was the Buckskin Range; in the two days of steady riding that had brought him across the Snake River Plains into Nevada, he had had these mountains ahead of him the greater part of the time, their barren, ten-thousand-foot peaks lying on the horizon no bigger than curiously twisted tufts of purple cotton, at first.

Within the past several hours the trail had become increasingly distinct and pocked with horse tracks that were not more than two or three days old. It was enough to tell him that he would be out of the Buckskins shortly and have open country ahead of him. It came sooner than he expected; the canyon walls receded sharply and when he rode out on the cap rock, there it was—half of northern Nevada spread out before him, it seemed.

Tinsley pulled up and studied the rolling expanse long and carefully. Far to the west beyond undulating waves of gray sagebrush that seemed to stretch out to infinity, the sun was burying its hot face in the desert. In the distance directly below him, willowy brakes, clumps of aspen and an occasional cottonwood marked a water course. Along that stream he picked out several ranches, the houses surrounded by the stately Lombardy poplars found on all Nevada ranches.

He looked for the town that should have been down

there, but from where he sat in his saddle, he could not locate it. He was riding a high, long-barrelled roan gelding of proven wisdom. A slight pressure of the knees set the animal in motion, and his pack horse, trailing behind on a lead rope, followed obediently. The trail swung further out on the cap rock and around the last intervening shoulder of the mountain. In a matter of minutes, he caught his first glimpse of the town, dwarfed by distance, sitting out on the plain. He had never seen it before, but from landmarks he had often heard his father describe, he knew it was Hays City, and that he was looking down on the valley of the Sweetwater.

Seen at first glance, and with a stockman's eyes, it measured up to his expectations. He was aware, however, that he was coming to the Sweetwater in a time of trouble—trouble that he did not fully understand. Though it was not of his making, he knew he would quickly become involved in it; that hatred and suspicion would be directed at him, no matter how events shaped themselves.

When he reached the valley's rolling floor, he left the trail immediately and swung off to the right, where a stand of red cedar and aspen promised coolness and concealment for the night. Passing into the trees, he looked for a spring. He was deep into them and nearing their far fringe before he caught the fresh, damp smell of water. A spring trickled over a boulder and dripped invitingly into a pool below. A trail led from it and there were signs about that others often camped there the night.

Tinsley drank from the pool and permitted the horses to do the same. Caution was building up in him and the chance that he might not have the spring to himself led him to fill his canteen and move on until he was a quarter of a mile down the gentle slope. There, he picketed

the horses, made a little squaw fire of dry wood and cooked a meagre supper. The long twilight was fading into the blackness of early night. He ate leisurely, cleaned pot and pan and set them up to dry beside the dying fire. Caught there, half kneeling, he suddenly sensed a movement, back among the trees. He was armed, but even before he thought of his gun, he gave his attention to the glowing coals and the radiance they were giving off. Two quick handfuls of earth smothered them. He waited then, his right hand inching along his gun-belt to the holster.

The sound came again, moving off through the cedars now. Down the wind came the unmistakable smell of a wildcat. The animal furnished proof that it was the intruder by voicing a protesting squall before it slunk away.

Tinsley smiled to himself, thinking how easily he scared tonight. And yet when he spread his blankets, he took his gun from the holster, examined it briefly and then put it between the blankets, where he could reach it quickly. The horses were grazing contentedly. Before he turned in, he had a look at the picket pins and used his boot heel on them, driving them deeper into the earth. The stars were out. He was not oblivious to their splendor. The leaves of the aspens were whispering in the cool night wind and the air was redolent with the fragrance of cedars. There was a companionship in such things for him, and as he curled up in his blankets, he relaxed completely and whatever hardness there was in his young, lean face was quickly erased. After stretching his long legs luxuriously, he rolled over on his side and was soon asleep.

In that way peculiar to men whose lives are spent in the open, he slept lightly. Midnight had come and gone, when the sound of running horses brought him back to full consciousness. Raising himself on an elbow, he

listened intently, his dark eyes narrowing with sober concern as the tattoo of plunging hoofs swept nearer. His experienced ear told him that there were at least four, possibly as many as six, horses in this cavalcade, and that whoever was in the saddle was sending them along at a reckless, driving gallop.

Tinsley's first thought was that he would presently find himself surrounded. Beyond that, he didn't bother to speculate. He sat up and his fingers closed on his gun. Presently, he saw them, five in all, vague, ghostly figures in the starlight, as they poured up the slope in a tight little knot. Behind them, several miles to the south, a suspicious redness in the sky had blossomed into the awesome reflection of a raging fire. A ranch house burning? Tinsley thought not; the fire seemed to be making too rapid headway for that. More likely it was forty to a hundred tons of hay going up in flames.

It was beyond the scope of his concern; these midnight riders occupied his mind. He took it for granted that his presence in the valley had been discovered and that he was to be ordered out of the country. The horsemen rode out in the open, just beyond the edge of the trees and at a distance of no more than a hundred yards from him, holding to their reckless pace. Without any sign of pulling up, they swept past, one of them calling to another, "Head into the spring, Ritch! We'll wait up there for the others!"

They disappeared up the slope and in a few minutes he heard them crashing through the trees. Two or three minutes later, two stragglers passed and rode on to join the others.

The tension eased in Tinsley and he congratulated himself on the hunch that had decided him against spending the night at the spring. He repeated the words he had overheard and anchored them indelibly in his

mind. That voice was a young voice, not over twenty, he was sure.

Briefly, the night brought to him the faint, confused babble of their talking and their nervous, excited laughter. Later, he heard them moving through the trees in the direction of the trail that came out of the Buckskins. A patter of beating hoofs followed and gradually receded into the valley.

Having had some experience with trouble of the nature that had been loosened along the Sweetwater, Tinsley took it for granted that there was a direct connection between the fire and these young men who rode so recklessly.

With their passing, the night was still again. The fire was dying out of the sky. After lying awake for a long time Tinsley slept until the sun awakened him. It was a clean blue and white morning. The magpies were on the wing, scolding him with their noisy chattering as they sailed overhead. Returning to the spring for fresh water and a look around, he flushed a flock of sagehens that had come in to drink. The birds got up slowly and if he had cared to risk a shot, he could have had one for breakfast.

The damp earth below the spring was cut up with fresh horse tracks. Someone had carelessly tossed aside a crumpled cigarette package. That was all, and it provided no clue to the identity of the young men who had rendezvoused there during the night.

Tinsley was back on the trail an hour later, moving along at a leisurely pace that had the double purpose of being calculated not to attract attention and permitting him to arrive in Hays City after it was awake and going about its daily business. A wooden bridge just north of town carried him over the Sweetwater. Only in a semi-arid country, where water was precious, would it have been dignified with the name of river. It gath-

ered its strength in the Buckskins and after breaking out of the mountains received only the flow of Canada Creek in its long journey to the Little Owyhee, fifty-odd miles to the southeast.

The Sweetwater had been kind to Hays City, its poplars, cottonwoods and other greenery giving it an inviting appearance that was a far cry from the treeless, sun-baked cow towns of Tinsley's acquaintance in Idaho and eastern Oregon. Otherwise, he found it the same, even to the tawny dust that lay deep in its main street. He had timed his arrival nicely, and the casual interest he aroused was only such as any stranger would have drawn.

A sign directed him to a livery barn. He left the horses there and found a barber shop. He was the only customer at this hour. However, the barber had just finished shaving him, when a tall, broad-shouldered man, his mustache and hair shot with gray, walked in. On his vest, he wore a silver star. Tinsley knew this was Sheriff Buck Ruxton. The two exchanged an impersonal nod and Ruxton hung his hat on a wall hook and waited to get into the chair.

Tinsley sensed that the sheriff was regarding him carefully, without seeming to do so.

"A new face. I don't seem to remember you," Ruxton observed pleasantly. "Stranger?"

"Yeh."

"Did you come in from the south?"

"No, Idaho."

Tinsley understood the purpose behind this apparently friendly questioning. He could have introduced himself and cut it short. He preferred, however, to let the sheriff smoke him out, if that was his intention.

"I had a look at your broncs," Ruxton acknowledged without apology. "I noticed they was wearin' an Idaho brand. Where did you camp last night? In the valley?"

"The upper valley. The sun was down when I came out of the mountains. I turned off into the cedars, found a spring and camped just below it. I saw that you had a bad fire down this way about midnight. Is that why you're grilling me?"

"I'm a mite curious, I'll admit," said Ruxton. "Somebody set Sam Grinell's hay afire. About fifty tons was burned up. . . . You goin' to be around?"

"I expect to be around some time."

"Good. Where will I find you?"

"The Owyhee Livestock Company's P Bench ranch."

"So?" From beneath his bushy brows old Buck regarded him with heightened interest. After a long moment, he said, "By the cut of your chin, you could be a Tinsley."

Clark nodded and a widening grin lifted the corners of his mouth.

"Old Morg's boy?"

"One of them, Buck. I'm Clark, the baby of the family."

"Wal!" Ruxton grunted, suddenly as gruff as he had been pleasant. "Why in hell didn't you say so? Your old man was a long time friend of mine."

"I know," Clark told him. "I hope you'll be able to say the same of me some day."

Buck wagged his head soberly. "It could git to that. But I'm warnin' you you're hittin' the Sweetwater at a bad time; old friends are fallin' out awful sudden. . . . I'll be in my office later in the mornin'. Drop in; I'd like to have a little talk with you."

"I'll do that," Tinsley agreed. "Where'll I find Britt Carter's office?"

"Across from the hotel, above the *Dispatch*. You'll see his name on the windows. You most likely won't find him in; it's still a mite early for Britt to be downtown."

"I'll wait," Tinsley said, on his way out.

He left the barber shop not only refreshed but well pleased that he had made Buck Ruxton's acquaintance so soon, and his step was buoyant as he sauntered down the street, his spur chains jangling pleasantly on the plank sidewalk. He found the hotel at the corner of the second cross street. The three-story brick structure was old but the long covered porch that extended to the sidewalk at the street level looked cool and inviting. A wooden sign informed anyone who was interested that this was the Sweetwater House.

Tinsley stepped on the porch and selected a comfortable looking rocking chair. Though he had been awake for hours, it was only a few minutes past eight. Across the way, he could see Britt Carter's law offices, the shades still drawn. As he settled down to what he realized might be a long wait, appetizing odors from the dining room began to assail his nostrils. As much to kill time as because he was already hungry again, he decided to treat himself to the luxury of a second breakfast of ham and eggs.

There were other diners. Bits of their conversation drifted his way and he overheard men's names mentioned that were vaguely familiar, possibly, he thought, because at some time or another he had heard his father mention them.

Through the dining room windows he could see the activity along the street picking up tempo. Men from the valley ranches were either riding in or arriving by buckboard behind gaited teams. After stopping at the desk to pay for his breakfast, he stepped out on the porch again. He was a tall, lean, handsome figure of a man as he stood with his back to one of the supporting columns and contemplated the scene before him.

It was Saturday, he realized, wondering if that accounted for the influx of stockmen and ranch families. On either side of the street, within a block of the hotel,

scarcely a vacant space was left at the hitch racks. As Tinsley stood there, two men, both well along in years, came face to face just in front of him and sight of the other immediately threw each into frenzied wrath.

"By grab, I figgered I'd run you down before the mornin' was gone, you sneakin', double-crossin' weasel!" the older of the pair, a dried up wisp of a man with skin as brown as saddle leather and the fighting face of a bantam gamecock screeched. "Yo're talkin' to headquarters, now, Grinell! Jest let me hear you say it was my boys what fired yore hay! Go on, say it!" he dared. "Say it jest once!"

"Why, you scrawny little Tom Tit, you ain't makin' me take water!" the other fired back just as vehemently. "My fence was cut last night on your line. There was fresh hoss tracks leadin' across your range to mine. That's what I been sayin', and I'm stickin' to it! If you can explain it, Williams, go ahead!"

A crowd had begun to gather. "Lay it into him, Teton!" a bystander shouted encouragingly to the little man. "He's damned lucky it wasn't his house that burned down! 'Tendin' all our meetin's—makin' us think he was with us, and all the time he was figgerin' to line up with the other side!"

This partisan supporter got small thanks for his trouble. "Supposin' you keep yore horns outa this, Dufors!" Teton Williams snapped back. "I kin handle this slipper-tongue!"

The crowd was solidly for old Teton until three men pushed through to Grinell and one of them said, "Okay, Sam; we'll stick around."

Tinsley overheard someone say, "That's Bill Starr, the Double Diamond foreman, and some of his crew."

Teton dismissed the newcomers with a contemptuous snort and fastened his blazing eyes on Grinell. "You and yore dog soldiers!" he sneered. "Was they to pertect

you—was that part of the deal you made with Morg Tinsley and the rest of them highbinders before you sold us out?"

"I made no deal with anybody!" Grinell whipped back. "I don't need no gun-slingers to back my play; I can stand up to you any time!"

But the presence of the Double Diamond foreman and his two punchers had made a difference that didn't escape Tinsley. As for himself, his interest in this violent harangue had quickened on hearing his father's name dragged in. Though both men were armed, he felt they were only letting off steam and that there was little chance that the encounter would end in gun-play.

"If I changed my mind and voted for formin' the water district, that was my right," Grinell ran on. "I was doin' what I figgered was best for me and what'll be best for the rest of you, give it time. You was ag'in it because you figgered it would hit you in the pocketbook. In the forty years I've known you, your pocketbook's always come first, and to hell with the other fella and what was right or wrong!"

The shaft found its mark, for in the process of pulling himself up by his own bootstraps from drifting cowboy to wealthy cowman, old Teton had been a ruthless, grasping neighbor, turning many sharp corners, not only boasting about the hard bargains he drove but even defying the law to head him off. The crowd, loyal enough to him in the present emergency, snickered mockingly. Stung by it, he reared up, trembling with fury.

"Don't let my pocketbook worry you, Grinell," he raged. "Look out for yore own!"

"That's what I'm aimin' to do," was the other's flinty response. "Nobody's burnin' a thousand dollars' worth of my hay without payin' for it. If you can't explain to me how my fence happened to be cut on your line and

the meanin' of them hoss tracks, you'll explain it to a jury!"

It was too much for Teton. Utterly beside himself, he reached for his gun. With the crowd held spellbound, a girl, obviously in her early twenties, rushed in between the antagonists and clutched Teton's right hand. Tinsley had been watching the two men so intently that he had not seen her till now. She was dressed for town but in dashing across the street she had lost her hat. Though her dark hair had become a bit disheveled and the color had drained out of her cheeks in her excitement, he found her undeniably beautiful, a deep intelligence in her eyes and her mouth strong and proud.

"No, no, Teton!" she cried. "Things are bad enough for our side without making them worse with anything as foolish as this! Give me your gun!"

Never in all his seventy-one years had old Teton encountered such a situation as this—his gun grabbed in the act of drawing! And by a young female! He tried to protest, but he was so completely flabbergasted that the best he could do was to sputter weakly, "Ria, 'tain't right for a girl to mix in a ruckus between men!"

"Teton—give me that gun!" she commanded with authority.

To the amazement of everyone, he handed it over. But he was not ready to strike his colors. Darting around her, he lunged at Grinell and began to pummel him with his fists. The latter was more than willing to do battle on such terms. Lowering his head, he began clawing back.

Ria got in between them again and tried to pry them apart. She was not aware of the tall man who was looking on from the hotel porch. Her back was to him when his quick step carried him to her side and he said, "Ma'am, can I assist you?"

"No, I don't need any help—" she started to say. She looked up then and quickly changed her mind when she saw Tinsley. Asking herself who this handsome stranger might be, she said tensely, "If you will, please!"

Tinsley pushed Grinell back into Bill Starr's arms. Plucking Teton up bodily, he set him down out of the other's reach and then made an effective barrier of himself that kept them apart.

The Double Diamond foreman took violent exception to the tall stranger's intervention. Before the situation got out of hand, however, Buck Ruxton and the town marshal broke through the crowd.

Val Almquist, Hays City's burly marshal, laid a heavy hand on Teton and said, "You take care of Sam, Buck; I'll walk Teton down to the pokey and keep him there till he cools off."

"Let go of me, you big squarehead!" Teton railed, endeavoring to knock the marshal's hand off his shoulder.

"Come on, Teton, we're going up the street," big Val said, without taking offense.

He marched him off and Ruxton told the crowd to go about its business. "Break it up," he said. "This thing's gone far enough. We won't have no more nonsense out of you, Sam."

"That dirty hoss thief drew on me!" Grinell objected angrily. "He started—"

"I know, Sam, I know," Ruxton interrupted goodnaturedly. "Just forget it. Go along now, and take it easy."

The crowd was moving away. Grinell and the Double Diamond men turned up the street together. Tinsley was only vaguely aware of their going; his attention was fixed on Ria. A boy had rescued her hat. It looked as though someone had stepped on it. She frowned as she saw its sorry condition. "And it was new, too," she

murmured. She looked up then to find Tinsley smiling. "I want to thank you," she said. "You made it appear very easy."

"It was nothing," he assured her.

She hesitated, as though expecting him to introduce himself. Tinsley wished that he might. If he refrained, it was not because he surmised that his name and connections would scarcely recommend him to her. He had come to this Sweetwater country hoping to keep his identity a secret and resolved to say as little as possible until he had learned all the details and ramifications of the proposed Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association. Ruxton knew his secret, but believing he could rely on the sheriff's discretion, he lifted his hat to her and stepped back on the porch without saying another word.

Ruxton spoke to her briefly. Tinsley was too far away to catch what they were saying. Suddenly, he saw her hurry to the edge of the sidewalk and hail a young man, still in his teens, who was driving by in a light buckboard. "Ritchie!" she called to him. "There's a basket of groceries at Schilling's. You'll see my name on the slip. Pick it up and meet me at the millinery shop in half an hour."

The young man nodded and drove on.

"Ritchie?" Tinsley repeated to himself. Was this youngster the "Ritch" who had ridden into the spring in the cedars at midnight? The question provided its own answer.

It had a sobering effect on Tinsley. There was such a marked resemblance between the girl and the boy in the rig that he knew without being told that they were brother and sister. His glance followed Ria as she proceeded down the sidewalk, her head held high and her step light and graceful. Somewhere, he promised himself, he would meet her again. When, and in what cir-

cumstances, he couldn't say. In the meantime, however, he knew she would run through his dreams.

He saw the sheriff beckoning to him. "Britt just went up the stairs to his office," said Buck. "Mebbe you better git over there if you want to see him. He often goes up the river for a little fishin' on Saturday."

Tinsley murmured his thanks. Stepping off the sidewalk, he crossed the street, his boots kicking up little tawny puffs of dust.

2

In the long ago Britt Carter had come to Nevada from the Deep South and established himself as a promising young lawyer. During the intervening years his sagacity and integrity had won him an enviable reputation that extended far beyond Hays City. His speech had lost the flavor of his native South Carolina, but in appearance, with his snow-white hair, tiny goatee, black string tie and the white linen suits he donned as soon as the weather turned warm, he was still the Southern aristocrat. He got up from his chair and shook hands warmly with Tinsley.

"I was shocked to hear that your father has passed on," he said. "It must have come quickly. He appeared to be in his usual good health when I saw him last, not more than two weeks ago."

"It came very quickly," Clark informed him. "Dad had been back in Boise from Nevada just a day or two. We were just sitting down to supper. He was napping in the living room; he had complained of being tired. That should have warned us; he was always tireless. Frank called him. When he didn't come, the three of us went in to see what was wrong. It was all over; he had died in his chair without making a sound."

Carter shook his head regretfully. "It's too bad. But if you have to go, that's a nice way. Now that you've come to the Sweetwater, it won't surprise you to hear your father called a hard man. In many ways, he was, but I

always found him a just man; he made friends as well as enemies. If you boys fill his boots, you can be proud of yourselves. Has any disposition been made of the property?"

Tinsley nodded. "I get the Nevada ranch; Frank and Charlie have agreed to divide the Idaho and Oregon holdings between them."

"That means breaking up the Owyhee Livestock Company," the lawyer observed regretfully. "I was hoping you'd be able to keep the old name alive."

"That's what we plan to do," said Tinsley. "Financially, we'll operate independently but we'll do business under the name of the Owyhee Livestock Company, adding—of Nevada, or of Oregon or Idaho, as the case may be. Dad often told me if I ever found myself in Hays City and needed a friend or advice that I should come to you. That's why I'm here this morning, Mr. Carter. Judging by what happened across the street a minute ago, I'm in need of both, I'm afraid."

Carter shook his head soberly. "I'd say that incident was an accurate indication of how matters stand and what we can expect to develop. Teton Williams and Sam Grinell were staunch friends as long as I can remember. Now they're flying at each other's throat. . . . But sit down. Take this chair. Your father always said it was the only comfortable chair in the office."

The worn, leather-covered chairs and other furnishings had a look of antiquity. The shelves of law books, rising from the floor to the ceiling, gave off a musty odor. And yet Tinsley knew that it was here, in this dowdy office, that much of the business that had shaped the history of the valley of the Sweetwater had been transacted.

"Of course, it's this water project that's on your mind," Carter remarked, as he settled himself at his desk. "How much do you know about it?"

"Very little. Dad mentioned it several times, when he was home. But he never discussed it with us. I understood that he expected big things to come of it."

"Then it's information you want as well as advice. Which will you have first?"

The engaging frankness of the man appealed to Tinsley. "It better be the information," he replied, a smile touching his mouth. "Where did this thing start—and who's behind it? And what's the need for it?"

The lawyer leaned back in his swivel chair and chuckled softly. "That ought to cover everything. I'll begin by answering your last question first. You know the Owyhee River and the Snake. We've got the same condition here on long stretches of the Sweetwater—the river flowing deep in its bed, ten to fifteen feet below the surface of the adjacent land. A water wheel is the only means of bringing it up to the land level. That's the way you do it along the Snake. It's never been tried here, chiefly because the flow varies so much. At best, it's a clumsy, unsatisfactory means of irrigation. So through all the years I've been here the talk has always been about the water that goes to waste and what it would mean for the valley if that water could be put on the land. Every stockman has to winter feed his cattle in this country. That means hay, and hay is often high, as it happens to be now. The more hay you raise, the less you have to buy. We've got the land and the water. Get the water on the land and a man can harvest as much alfalfa as he wants to put in. To state it briefly, that's the need for doing something to give the valley more water."

"You've made that part of it clear enough, Mr. Carter. You speak of stretches of the river that can't be tapped by a ditch. There must be many places where that can be done. When my father bought the P Bench ranch, old, established water rights went with the prop-

erty. Of course, many others must be using the river, too."

"Oh, yes! When the vote was taken two weeks ago to decide whether the water district should be formed or not, only those parties who could prove State recognized water rights were permitted to cast a ballot. The argument was made that they would benefit as much as anyone else by the construction of a high dam in the Buckskins, with the water brought into the valley through a canal, or a mother ditch, instead of the river."

"Isn't that a fact?" Tinsley asked. "Somehow, you sound a bit skeptical."

The elderly lawyer shrugged and said, "Perhaps I am a bit skeptical. There's nothing wrong with the proposition to harness the Sweetwater. It could be the making of this part of Nevada for a hundred miles around. That's if the project is operated on a truly cooperative basis, serving no one's special interest. . . . But to get back to your question as to whether there'll be more water for all, take Sam Grinell, for instance. He'll be in a position to get more water. That's not saying he'll get it."

"You mean he's apt to be tricked out of it?"

"Trickery is too strong a word. It may be circumstances that will defeat him. Sam will have to pay for what water he gets, and he and everyone else will have to do the same, and in advance, and on a given date. Say beef prices drop and he has a bad year. When the following spring comes around, he may not have the money to pay for his water. What will he do then?"

"I don't know," Tinsley declared thoughtfully. "But aren't those the conditions on which other water districts are being operated? The Newlands Project, for one. If a man can't pay for his water before he uses it, he may refuse to pay later on. The co-op may sue him

and get a judgment. That costs money to get and more money to collect."

"You're not altogether correct," said Carter. "Take the Newlands Project. There wasn't any surrendering of previous water rights. Here on the Sweetwater, that's the core of the plan. You and Grinell and everyone else is to be given stock in the company in exchange, scaled to conform with the volume of the rights so surrendered. . . . Don't misunderstand me, Clark; I have no fault to find with that set up: those conditions are plainly stated in the articles of incorporation. My point is that they don't go far enough to cover any number of distressing situations that may arise. I'm willing to agree that the stock will be valuable; that it should show a handsome profit in time. But just supposing that Grinell should be caught short and offered to put up his stock in lieu of cash and the directors of the corporation were to decide that it wasn't acceptable. They'll have the authority to say yes or no in such matters, and their decision will be final. If they say no, then what becomes of Grinell? He'll be ruined; he can't get along without water. He'll have to dispose of his cattle. Very likely, he'd have to let the bank have his ranch."

Tinsley mulled it over for a few moments and then said, "That's not a pretty picture. If anything of that sort happened, it would be an exceptional case, you'll agree."

"Not necessarily; it could happen to a dozen men. Their holdings are small when you compare them with Owyhee Livestock, Double Diamond and three or four others. There's a mortgage on every one of them."

On his visitor's face he saw the same displeasure and stubbornness that he had so often observed in Morgan Tinsley; the same pulling down of the corners of the mouth and knotting of the cheek muscles.

"I see that you don't like what I'm saying," he de-

clared. "But you've come to me for information. You wouldn't want me to sit here and not tell you what I foresee."

"No," Tinsley agreed. "Did my father see these things?"

"Clark, I don't know what your father saw in this proposition. He came to me when the matter was first being discussed. Nothing had taken definite shape, so our talk had to be of a general nature. He was decidedly of the opinion that harnessing the Sweetwater would be very profitable for the Owyhee Livestock Company. Win Berdan, the president of the Hays City National, was promoting the project. When it began to shape up, Tom Lamb, the bank's attorney, was called in to do all the legal work. Several parties, among those who opposed the idea, asked me to represent them. I preferred to keep out of it. But I've watched it closely. I suppose you know that your father made a commitment in regard to the bonds of the company."

"Yes, forty thousand dollars. I'll honor any commitments he made. What I do beyond that, I'm not ready to say."

Britt Carter smiled to himself, thinking how much Clark sounded like old Morg. "I think you're right," he said. "I'd keep an open mind about it. . . . Have you seen Berdan yet?"

"No, I haven't talked to anyone except Ruxton. I ran into him in the barber shop. He nailed me; asked me if I wasn't one of the Tinsleys. I told him I was."

"You won't be here long before everybody knows you're the new boss of P Bench. You'll want to see Berdan, of course. Don't let anything I've said prejudice you against him or the project. As I said in the beginning, it can be the making of this country."

"I appreciate all that," Tinsley murmured. Sitting up a little straighter, he regarded the attorney across the

desk with a shrewd, searching glance. "There's something about this proposition that you don't like, Mr. Carter. You've been frank with me up to now. I want you to give it to me straight from the shoulder."

Carter chuckled heartily. "My boy, I'm being as frank as I can; I'm not holding back anything. If I have expressed any doubt about the future of the Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association it's only because the big interests are in control. The idea had their backing from the first. We've got six so-called big outfits along the river; your Owyhee Livestock, Double Diamond, Harvey Stock's 44, Dog Iron, Bar Cross and Teton Williams' Flying W. Teton was the only one who jumped the traces and refused to go along with the others. He's an individualist; paying for his water and having someone tell him when he could or couldn't take it out of a ditch didn't appeal to a lone wolf like him. But the others, along with the bank, went along together and subscribed a quarter of a million dollars for the bonds. That could be all right, but it's been my experience that when big interests line up, someone is apt to get squeezed. When that happens, it's always the little fellow who gets hurt."

The white-haired attorney left his chair and walked to the window, where he stood gazing absent-mindedly at the street below. Tinsley sat there, a frown puckering his tanned face. There was an inescapable indictment of his father in what Carter had just said and he could not blink that fact that there was a big measure of truth in it; the Owyhee Livestock empire had not been put together by having any mercy on the other fellow.

"Mr. Carter, what about the vote that was taken? Judging by the griping Teton Williams was doing about it, it was rigged."

"I don't know as to that, but certainly great pressure

was put on certain parties. Noses had been counted, of course. It was well known that a number of the smaller ranches, who were under obligations of one sort or another to the bank or one of the big outfits, would vote their way. Teton had been busy lining up the opposition. The State required that seventy-five percent of the votes cast be in favor of forming the water district before the charter and required legislation would be authorized. Teton told me he had enough votes to defeat the proposition. At the last minute, Grinell and three others, on whom he was counting, switched to the other side. It was more than enough to decide the issue. Win Berdan can tell you more about it than I; he led the fight for the project."

"It won't be necessary for me to speak to Berdan about it." Tinsley's voice was hard and thin. "You've told me what I wanted to know, and it only confirms the feeling I had as I listened to Teton and Grinell going to it. . . . In plain words, there was a sell-out. No wonder Grinell's hay was fired last night. There'll be more of that." He picked up his hat and got to his feet. "Mr. Carter —do you know what the pay-off was?"

The aged attorney stroked his goatee thoughtfully and was slow to answer. When he did, he spoke carefully. "A pay-off would be a criminal offense. The same would be true if it could be established that the last minute switching of votes was due to compulsion or threats of reprisal. It would certainly result in the election being set aside and a new one ordered. I have no evidence or knowledge of how those votes were obtained. I certainly would not presume to say, or even suggest, that any law was violated. I don't mind saying, however, that the only hope Teton and his crowd have of stopping this scheme now is to prove that those votes were obtained illegally. There's been talk to the effect that the State of Idaho will fight the plan on the

grounds that it means diverting water from the Little Owyhee. Nothing will come of that; the Sweetwater rises in Nevada and never gets out of the state."

"Where do things stand now?" Tinsley inquired. "Is any work being done?"

"Yes, a party of engineers are up the river. The site of the dam has been located and they're starting in to stake out the mother ditch. You'll find a map of the water district in the bank window." He paused briefly. "You came to me for advice. Do you still want me to give you some?"

"Go ahead," Tinsley told him.

"It's just this, Clark; play your own hand. I don't mean for you to be neutral. That won't be possible; you'll have to stand with one faction or the other. Just don't take anything for granted."

The tall man nodded. "That's good advice, and I'll take it. Undoubtedly I'll be seeing you frequently; I want you to take care of any legal work that comes up."

Tinsley was at the door, when he turned back.

"Mr. Carter, that girl who took Teton Williams' gun —he called her Ria. Who is she?"

"Maria Eaton. A remarkable young woman, Clark. There's fire and spunk in her that a man might envy."

"But why Maria?" he queried. "That has a Spanish-Mexican sound."

"She gets that from her mother, Elena. Your father had a great respect for Elena Eaton. He respected anyone who could get the better of him. He used to say that he could have bought the Eaton ranch at his own price but for her. You'll see their place on your way to P Bench. It's the white house with the long gallery that overlooks the river." With a twinkle in his eyes, he added: "I wouldn't advise you to turn in for a visit."

"No, I don't believe it would be wise," Tinsley re-

turned, with a fleeting smile. "I'll do well to stay on my side of the fence."

He went down the stairs with the intention of proceeding to the bank, but on reaching the street, he found Bill Starr and his Double Diamond men waiting for him. Starr accosted him at once, saying: "I can always use another hand. If you're lookin' for a job, you've got one with me."

"Thanks for thinking I'd fit in," Tinsley said quietly. "But you're a little late, Bill; I have a job."

"That's just what I wanted you to say," Starr flung back, and all the counterfeit cordiality was gone from his voice. "You're the first of the gunmen Teton Williams has been threatening to bring in. I spotted you as soon as I laid eyes on you. . . . Well, mister, we're waitin' for you. Double Diamond is closed to all comers, and that goes for the other big spreads. We got hay that can be burned, too, and stock that can be shot. I'm givin' you the word right now; when you see that sign, 'No Trespassing,' it means what it says!"

"Have you had your say?" Tinsley demanded, still holding his voice down, but the stony coldness of his eyes crying a warning. A certain stiffness had whipped through him that held his body rigid, his arms hanging at his side.

Bill Starr's eyes were suddenly full with what they saw. Some sixth sense told him that he was over his head with this tall man. A belated caution ran through him and he said, "Yeh, I've had my say."

"Then get out of my way!" Tinsley rapped.

Quick defiance flowed into Bill Starr's rocky face, but the will to do something about it had lost its sharp edge. He flicked a glance at his men and then took a backward step.

Tinsley crossed the street and moved along in the direction of the livery barn. He had decided that the bank

and Win Berdan could wait. Ahead of him, he saw Ruxton. Lengthening his stride, he overtook the sheriff and told him he was getting out to P Bench at once.

"You're in a bigger hurry than you was an hour ago," said Buck. "Somethin' happen?"

"Bill Starr tried to crowd me a bit. He's got me down for one of the imported gunmen Teton must have said he was bringing in."

The sheriff laughed. "Won't Bill be surprised!"

"He's got a double surprise coming to him. He says the big spreads have closed their range to all comers. That may do for the Double Diamond and the others; it won't do for me. If I'm raided, I'll know what to do about it. But I'm not putting up any deadlines."

Ruxton shook his head dubiously. "Nip Logan and Harve Stock won't like it. Your old man always made it a point to show a solid front with them."

"I'm not my old man, Buck," Tinsley said flatly. "The sooner certain parties realize it, the better."

3

THE MAIN ROAD down the valley crossed the tracks of the Hays City branch of the little Nevada and Idaho Railroad at the edge of town and then swung off to follow the river for half a dozen miles.

From Britt Carter's description of it, Tinsley recognized the Eaton place in passing. It was a comfortable-looking house, set well back from the road and shaded by its tall poplars. He looked that way but no one was about. Very likely Ria was still in town. In his mind's eye he could see her again as she was when she stood between Teton Williams and Grinell, her lithe, vibrant body bending like a sapling as she struggled to part them, her dark eyes determined and unafraid. And he saw her as she smiled at him. It was a disturbing memory that lingered with him for miles.

He was looking for a fork in the road, Ruxton having told him that when he reached it he would only have to ford the river to be on P Bench range. He had no difficulty finding it. The crossing was a natural one that Owyhee Livestock had used for years. Humoring the horses, he stopped in mid-stream and permitted them to drink. He could see the ranch road unwinding across the rolling range. Far to the east, the country pinched up into low, ragged hills. The Mustang Hills, he was sure. Through them P Bench steers had often disappeared between darkness and dawn, in the days when rustling was a profitable, organized business along the Nevada-Idaho line.

Within a few feet of the river's edge he found a closed

gate confronting him. Nailed on it was a crudely lettered wooden sign that read:

NO TRESPASSING
by Owyhee Livestock Co.

He understood that the Sweetwater was the actual boundary line and that the fence had been set back on rising ground solely to prevent its being washed away in the annual spring run-off, when melting snow in the Buckskins was pouring an icy flood into the river.

Tinsley lifted the loop of baling wire that held the gate fast. Opening the gate wide enough to permit the horses to pass, he led them through, closed the gate and then ripped off the sign. Splitting it on a fence post, he tossed the pieces into the brush and rode on.

On either side of the ranch road cows were grazing, or moving about in the aimless wandering of range cattle that makes them desert good graze for a patch of grass further on that may be far less succulent. They were all white-faced Hereford, fine stock and in excellent condition. It didn't surprise Clark Tinsley; his father had been improving the bloodline of his herds for many years, once paying the then record high price of twelve thousand dollars for a prize-winning bull at the Denver Livestock Show.

At the top of the gentle slope, the road cut through a thicket of green mahogany bush. Tinsley had no more than ridden into it, when an unseen watcher called out: "That's far enough, mister! Git down and elevate yore hands!"

Caught at that disadvantage Tinsley found it the part of wisdom to comply. Again the voice spoke, to a companion this time, "Red, git his gun."

The two men stepped out now. Tinsley took it for granted that they belonged to his own P Bench crew.

To the red-headed man he said: "This is apt to be an embarrassing business for you boys. Instead of reaching for my gun, Red, you and your friend better take me to the house and let me talk to Mr. Martin."

Morgan Tinsley had always made it a point to address his foreman as mister. To the crew Henry Martin was just plain Henry.

"So you want to see Henry, eh?" Red queried skeptically. "You got business on P Bench?"

"Important business."

Red flicked a glance at his companion. "What do you think, Purdy?"

"I think he can't read—or mebbe he don't believe in signs," Purdy growled.

"I can read," Tinsley assured him. "And I sure believe in signs. That's why I got rid of that one on the gate. I'm in no position to argue the matter with you but I don't like the idea of giving up my gun or standing here reaching for the sky. If it makes any difference to you, Mr. Martin is expecting me."

His light, bantering tone had some effect on the two men. They whispered together for a moment.

"All right," Red decided for the two of them, "we'll take you to the house. If you want to git there in one piece, keep your hands away from your hardware."

Tinsley grinned to himself as they rode on, Red on his right and Purdy on the other side, with both men keeping him under a close surveillance. He spoke freely of the fire and the encounter between old Teton and Sam Grinell, omitting his part in it.

"So it was Sam's hay that went up," Purdy said. "We could see the fire was down that way. I'm danged if I believe Teton had a finger in it; he'd have figgered he'd be the first to be suspected."

"More'n likely it was just kids," Red observed weightily. "There was a meetin' at the Eatons a couple nights

ago. Ria got everybody steamed up. Some folks figger this fight is all over. Accordin' to her, it ain't even begun. It ain't no surprise to me that she stepped in between them two old galoots and made 'em back down. She ain't afraid of hell or high water." He gave Tinsley a quizzical, searching glance. "Mister, you hornin' in on this scrap?"

"I didn't come to this country looking for trouble," the tall man answered. "If it's brought to me, I don't propose to walk away from it."

Tinsley ran his eyes over the house and other buildings as they jogged into the yard. The house, set to one side, with a long covered porch or gallery overlooking the yard, was old but in good repair. The crew's quarters, further down the yard, had been built within the past five years, fire having destroyed the old bunkhouse. The ranch smithy, saddle shed, barn and smokehouse stood in line, forming a little street. Mowers and other machinery were under cover. It bespoke a methodical, industrious foreman and an owner who had the wisdom never to waste nor spare a dollar.

Clark Tinsley was filled with a conscious sense of pride in his father. What he saw here on P Bench, he had seen on the other Tinsley ranches. Together, they stood as a monument to Morgan Tinsley. It was no wonder that Britt Carter had said he hoped that the proud old name of the Owyhee Livestock Company would be kept alive.

Red and Purdy led their prisoner up to the hitch rack that paralleled the gallery. Four doors opened on it. Out of the one marked "office" stepped a thin, slightly stoop-shouldered man who was as faded and colorless as his clothes. There was the light of eagles in his eyes, however, and his tanned, cadaverous face was shrewd and alert. Consternation, followed by a flashing anger, whipped through him as he beheld the two cow-

boys and the man they had intercepted. The picture they presented was instantly understandable to him.

"What the hell's the idea of this?" he cried, from the gallery railing.

"Henry, we jumped this gent just inside the gate," Red explained. "He'd let himself through and then ripped off the 'No Trespassing' sign and busted it into kindlin'. We let him keep his gun only because he says he's got business here and you was expectin' him."

"You damned fools!" the P Bench foreman exploded. "You've stuck up the boss! That's Clark Tinsley you've got there, you idiots!"

"Goddlemighty!" Red groaned. His shoulders slumped and he was a pitiful figure as he sat there. A hoarse croak came from Purdy. His lips tried to form words but they refused to come.

"Don't be too hard on them, Mr. Martin," Tinsley spoke up, a lively twinkle in his eyes. "They're a couple of right nice boys. The red-headed one really takes my eye. I suppose I should have had a sign hung around my neck with my name on it. They'll learn, give them time."

His laugh was merry and honest. Red and Purdy took heart enough to join in weakly.

"We'll never live this down, boss," the latter declared unhappily. "Red and me might just as well ask for our time and start driftin'."

"I reckon you're right, Purdy," Red agreed solemnly, and with a great wagging of the head. "We better go now before this gits around and we're laughed outa this country."

"Well, if you boys don't talk, I won't," Tinsley offered.

"Go along with you!" Henry offered. "Take the pack off that horse and fetch it into the house. You can turn the broncs into the corral, then. I'll be down the yard directly."

He and Tinsley spent half an hour together in the of-

fice, getting acquainted. This was the first they had seen of each other in three years, when Henry had accompanied Clark's father on a swing around the Owyhee Company's ranches. It had often been said of Henry Martin that he was just a human machine, utterly devoid of sentiment. Though he tried to conceal it, he was deeply touched by the passing of Morgan Tinsley. For years, their almost daily contacts had been such that, in many ways, he had been closer to the man than his own sons. Though there was no hint of it in what he had to say, deep within him was the feeling that the passing of Morg Tinsley marked the end of an era; that changes would be made; that new ways would take the place of the old. He didn't know whether he could change with them; but his loyalty to the father extended to Clark, and it was his earnest hope that he might be able to serve one as faithfully as he had the other.

Tinsley was not altogether unaware of what went on in his foreman's mind. He said, "As I wrote you, Henry, Dad provided for you in his will, and when you feel that you want to retire, you're to be pensioned at full pay. I hope that won't be for some years; I want you to ramrod P Bench as you have in the past. I can't promise that my ways will always be my father's ways. I'll have to stand on my own feet sooner or later, so I'm going to start now. I ripped that sign off the gate because I want P Bench to be as open as I'm going to try to keep my mind. And I don't mean only in regard to the water organization. If any more signs are up, I want you to have them taken down."

Henry Martin did his best to dissemble his amazement. Cautiously, he said, "I'm afraid you're inviting trouble, Clark."

"It's inviting more trouble to put up a few signs and try to guard a thirty-thousand acre ranch with a crew

of ten men. What little I know about this fight leaves me up in the air; I'm not ready to say who's right and who's wrong. But I'm convinced that we'll have less trouble if we let both sides know that we stand for a fair deal all around."

Henry shook his head gloomily. "There never was any two sides to an argument when your pa was alive; we were always right, and the other fellow was always wrong. And we made it stick. It's always been the same crowd who opposed us and always the same men who stood with us, no matter if it was politics, a change in the tax rate or anything else. We could always count on Teton Williams till this trouble came up. He flopped over to the other side. What's it got him? If you was to go to him and the Eatons and the rest of that crowd and tell them you was willing to meet them halfway, they wouldn't believe you. Nip Logan and the other big interests would turn on you. You wouldn't have a friend in the valley."

"I imagine my position would be difficult to understand," Tinsley acknowledged readily. "No matter what I say or do, the fact that I'll have forty thousand dollars tied up in the bonds of the water company will be taken as a pretty good indication of where I really stand."

"Taken by the opposition, you mean. I don't believe there's any question about it. Nip Logan and Harvey Stock and a few others wouldn't regard it that way; they'd be apt to figure there was a double cross somewheres. Maybe I shouldn't say it, Clark, but if I was in their boots, that's how it would appear to me. If your pa taught me one thing, it was that if you're with a man on any proposition, you're with him all the way, or you ain't with him at all. I've always found it a good way." If he had been a loquacious man, he would have added that you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

Tinsley smiled soberly, sensing the foreman's growing

disappointment in him. "That sounds very familiar to me, Henry," he said. "I had it drilled into me, too, and by the same teacher. I've always played the game that way and hope I always shall. But before I take chips in this fight, some things will have to be explained; the promoter of this move to divert the Sweetwater will have to convince me that it will be a blessing for the valley and not just a slick scheme to feather his own nest at the expense of all of us who have water rights in the river. The proposition would have been defeated if there hadn't been a last minute switch of three or four votes. I'm going to make it my business to find out why those votes were switched. . . . Do you know anything about it, Henry?"

"Nope. I have enough to do on P Bench to occupy my time. I overhear the men talking. Where they get some of the things they say, I don't know. Of course, they get away from the ranch oftener than I do; riding down to the saloon at Grundy's Ford or high-tailing it into town every chance they get. They bring back all the gossip. That Red Lucas is the worst of the lot; he's always minding other folks' business. But you know what bunkhouse talk amounts to and how little stock you can put in it."

Tinsley agreed that he did but he also made a mental note to hear what Red Lucas might have to say.

A little, baldheaded man, who dragged his crippled right leg, appeared in the doorway.

"What is it, Smoky?" Martin asked.

"I swept out Morg's old room, Henry, and got it airing. If the boss wants to go up and git settled, I'll tote his stuff upstairs and help him unpack."

"Fine," Tinsley answered for himself. "You lead the way, Smoky, and I'll give you a hand with my junk." He got to his feet. From the door, he said to Martin: "I'll meet the crew when they come in for dinner. Let's not

have any formality about it, Henry. My name is Clark, and that's the way I want to be addressed. This afternoon, I'd like to have a look around and go over the books with you."

The foreman caught an echo of old Morg in this directness and he began to take heart again. On leaving the house, he hurried down the yard with characteristic vigor, his stoop-shouldered posture giving him an appearance of great intentness. "He's young," he muttered to himself, "but there's good stuff in him. If he don't get off on the wrong foot, he'll do all right."

Emotion tugged at Tinsley as he entered the big, comfortable room that his father had occupied for so many years.

"I'll make up the bed durin' the afternoon," Smoky told him. "The Chinaman will have some fresh sheets ready. You can see the river from the winders on this side of the room. Lord knows how long it'll be anythin' to look at."

Over his shoulder Tinsley said, "I guess you'll miss it, when they turn the water into the canal."

"I ought to," the old man grumbled. "I been lookin' at the Sweetwater for more'n thirty years. The trees will curl up and die and there won't be nuthin' there but a dry wash." His tone eloquently expressed what he thought about it. "I reckon a banged up old juniper like me ain't got no right to be blowin' off his mouth, but I can't help figgerin' that if God A'mighty had wanted a ditch there, where the Sweetwater's bin flowin' for years, He'd have put one in."

Smoky Gallatin had once been a top rider for P Bench. Years ago, a horse had fallen on him, breaking his leg. The leg had never been properly set, leaving him with what he described as "rheumatiz and the miseries." Instead of being turned off when his infirmities crept up on him, he had been kept on as a handyman

around the house. Now that P Bench had a new owner, Smoky was worried about what his fate was to be. With a forthrightness that did him credit, he took advantage of this opportunity to learn where he stood.

"When you git as old as I be, yuh don't like to see changes," he began with some indirection. "Yuh git so yo're afraid of 'em."

Tinsley, examining a frayed, freshly-laundered shirt and wondering why he had bothered to bring it all the way from Idaho, failed to respond.

"I said an old-timer like me gits afraid of changes," Smoky repeated. "I reckon yuh didn't hear me."

"I heard you," said Tinsley. "There won't be any changes made on P Bench that will make you any trouble—if that's what you got on your mind."

"By gum, yuh got me right off!" the old puncher cackled. "I can't do much no more. Yore paw kept me on, fer old times' sake, I reckon. I didn't know but what yuh might have different ideas. I figgered if I was goin' to be turned adrift, I better know it now."

"You can stop worrying," Tinsley told him. "You're a permanent part of P Bench, Smoky. Anytime you feel called on to cuss someone out, go right ahead."

The old man grinned. "Did Morg ever tell yuh that I cussed him out oncet?"

"Yeh." Tinsley laughed. "He never forgot it. I guess that was the last time he ever asked a man to make the hundred-mile trip to Winnemucca in the dead of winter without giving him four-bits for a hot breakfast in Paradise, on the way."

Tinsley's newness wore off in a day or two. He spent long hours in the saddle, exploring the ranch and getting acquainted with its problems. At first, he went out with Martin, then with Red. The red-haired one proved to be, as the foreman had said, a storehouse of gossip and unsubstantiated rumors. As they rode out one morn-

ing, however, Red had some news. He had ridden down to the combination grocery and saloon at Grundy's Ford the previous evening, for tobacco, he said.

"Ritchie Eaton and Bud Downs was there, with some others in the store. They know you're here, boss. Ritch had noticed that the sign was gone from the gate. He asked me what it meant."

"What did you tell him?"

"That if anybody had anythin' to say to you, the road was open."

"Good," Tinsley muttered. "Did you pick up any other news?"

"They was to have another meetin' at the Eatons last night. Teton and all of 'em was to be there. Cookin' up trouble of some sort, I reckon. Things ain't goin' to go on peaceful like this much longer. On the way home, I met up with Harve Stock and Cal Bridger, who ramrods the 44 spread for the old man. They'd been way up the river durin' the day, havin' a look at what them surveyors and engineers are doin' up there. Half a dozen of them fellas have been up there for a week or more, sightin' and squintin'. Harve says they got the site for the dam all marked off and are beginnin' to put in the stakes for the canal. They may go along all right for a time, but wait till they hit Jerry Downs' fence. If that Irishman ain't out there to meet 'em with a gun, I'm crazy."

"The law will step in," said Tinsley. "Downs will have to let them go through."

"Boss, you mean they can cross a man's range, no matter how he feels about it?"

"He can't run them off if they're there on the legitimate business of the water district. The State's put its okay on the project and given the company a charter. As soon as the water is turned into the main canal, ditch riders will be hired to patrol it. They'll be on the go

night and day, riding in relays. It'll be their business to remove any obstructions from the canal and see that the gates to the lateral ditches are opened and closed according to schedule. I had a young fellow working for me on the Jackson Creek ranch who'd ridden ditch for a couple years, in Colorado. He said he liked the work at first. He got all the news of the neighborhood and was a sort of unofficial mailman; carrying messages up and down the canal. The womenfolk started making a delivery man of him then. He stood it for a while, but he finally got sick of toting jars of preserves and dress patterns and the like from one end of the valley to the other."

The red-haired one grinned. "That don't sound so bad to me. A job like that would be just my dish. Reckon it'll be some time before there's any ditch ridin' done around here. If I know Jerry Downs, he won't let them surveyors through without a fight—law or no law—and I mean a gunfight. If they take care of him, they won't git far before they run into more of the same sort of trouble."

"I imagine an attempt will be made to stop them," Tinsley agreed. "That'll be a job for Ruxton."

"It'll be a job for him all right," Red declared gravely. "Mebbe too big a job for him to handle. I know these folks—old Teton, Downs, Frank Eaton, Dufors and all the rest of 'em. With Ria Eaton to keep 'em steamed up, they won't knuckle under till someone shoves a gun down their gullet. There'll be dead men along the Sweetwater before this scrap is over. Plenty of 'em!"

Tinsley let it pass without comment, but the violence Red foresaw echoed his own fears. Though he had reason to believe that burning Sam Grinell's hay was the work of youngsters, he refused to regard it as an isolated incident. The success of that venture, accomplished so far as they knew in complete secrecy, would undoubted-

ly spur them on to other reprisals, very likely of a much graver nature. That the raids and mounting strife would be confined to youngsters for any length of time was so improbable that he dismissed it without bothering to give it serious consideration.

Trouble wasn't waiting. It came that night, not at Jerry Downs' Box D fence but at the dam site, where Townley, the engineer, and his assistants had pitched camp on a wooded flat at the river's edge. Again it was midnight, when scattered volley shots from the edge of the flat above camp brought Townley and the others piling out of their tents. That first warning fusillade screamed harmlessly over their heads. It was followed by gunfire that was more persuasive: slugs began to rip through the flimsy canvas structures and kick up the dust around the befuddled engineers. Suddenly, a band of horsemen plunged across the flat, yelling like Indians, their guns flaming. Townley and his men quickly decided that discretion was the better part of valor. The way was open down the river. Leaving their instruments and personal effects behind, they fled precipitately.

The camp was soon a shambles; the tents were burned, costly instruments smashed and every stake pulled up and tossed into the river.

Tinsley was at the table, eating breakfast with Martin and the crew the following morning when two horsemen dashed into the yard and pulled up at the rack. Old Smoky, who was waiting on the table, clumped over to the table. "It's Nip Logan and Win Berdan," he announced. "Must be somethin' stirrin' to git Berdan all the way out from town as early as this!"

Martin started to get up. "I'll ask them in to breakfast."

"Don't bother," Tinsley told him. "I'll go out. They've got something more important than breakfast on their minds."

4

TINSLEY saw visible signs of excitement in his visitors as he stepped out on the gallery. One of them, a squat little man with a round, florid face, asked, "Are you Clark Tinsley?" When he received an affirmative nod, he said, "I'm Nip Logan. This is Berdan, from the bank. Hell broke loose up the river last night. We want to talk to you."

They were invited into the ranch office. Win Berdan, the banker, acquainted Tinsley with what had happened to the engineers. Though no longer young, he was still a vigorous man, with a shrewd nose and a closely cropped mustache. Ordinarily, he had a suave, reserved manner that many of the bank's customers had found impossible to pierce. He was too exercised this morning to mince words.

"We expected trouble, but not up there," he declared brusquely. "Ten days' work destroyed and several thousand dollars' worth of equipment ruined. We'll see that it doesn't occur a second time, I promise you!"

"All that shooting, and no one wounded or killed," Tinsley observed. "That shows remarkable restraint. You gentlemen don't believe it was an accident, do you?"

"I don't know what it was!" Nip Logan growled. "I know it cost us money and set us back a couple weeks. We're goin' to send men up the river to protect them fellas and stay with 'em till the job's finished. You got a big crew. We want a couple men from P Bench.

We're askin' all the big spreads to supply a couple good men."

Tinsley pressed his lips together tightly for a moment. "By good men, you mean men who won't hesitate to throw lead, I take it."

"Naturally!" Nip snapped. "We ain't goin' to be backed into a corner by that crowd!"

"What about Ruxton? Isn't it up to the sheriff to deputize men if he feels there's a need for it?"

"We're not waiting for Buck," Berdan spoke up. "When we've got the men we need, it'll be time enough to have him swear them in. As a big bondholder, you can realize our position."

"I'm not a big bondholder as yet," was Tinsley's startling reply. "My father paid in five thousand dollars. The balance is payable when and if the work reaches certain stages. If it does, I'll kick in without any argument. But when you ask me if I realize your position, I wonder if you do. If this water deal can only be put over at gun point, it'll never get very far."

"Hunh!" the round little owner of Double Diamond snorted scornfully. "You mean to say that Teton Williams, Frank Eaton and half a dozen others can stop us?"

"I don't believe that's the size of it," said Tinsley. "If they weren't sure they had some support, and a lot of it, they'd have thrown in the towel already. There's about twelve hundred people in Hays City. They don't own any water rights, but they're interested in this fight. From what I've been able to learn, most of them are against the proposition."

Berdan made light of it. "Harnessing the river will double the population of Hays City. Talk to them and they'll tell you they're against it because it'll kill some of the trees, or ruin the picnic grounds. They'd be against any improvement, no matter what."

"I'm afraid there's more to it than that," Tinsley in-

sisted. "Could it be that they feel there's a joker in this deal, somewhere?"

The question flustered Berdan. "Every move we've made has been open and above board. Get men of means like yourself and Logan behind a proposition and fools will always say you're out to do someone. Where are you going to get money for a project of this kind if you don't get it from men who have it? You've expressed some doubt as to the future of the Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association. There's no reason to feel that way. The dam is not an extensive one. Once work starts on it, it'll be completed in three months. Before snow flies, the canal and whole system of ditches will be in. We'll be selling water next spring. As for proceeding at gun point, I'm as much against it as you are. I'm sure that a little decisive action right now will end the threat of future trouble."

"We're talkin' around the barrel and wastin' time," Logan protested impatiently. "We've got to go all the way down the valley this mornin', Tinsley. All we want from you now is for you to agree to have a couple men at my place tomorrow mornin', prepared to go up the river and stay there. The company will take care of their grub."

Tinsley had his answer ready. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I'm not sending any of my crew on any errand like that."

"What!" Logan roared, his round face purple with rage. "You mean you refuse? You're breakin' with us?"

"No, I'm not breaking with you," was Tinsley's quiet answer. "When I feel I can go along with you, I will; but not when I see you making a move that will make a long and bitter fight absolutely certain."

"Wal, I'm damned! I do be damned!" Logan was on his feet, storming back and forth, blowing like a grampus. He drew himself up in front of Tinsley and gave

him a withering glance. "That's strange talk from the mouth of Morg Tinsley's son! But you go your way, young fella; we'll do without you; if you find the shoe pinchin' on the other foot, one of these days, don't come to me for help! I got no use for a fence straddler! . . . Come on, Win! The quicker I git off this spread, the better I'll like it!"

Berdan hung back. "This is very unfortunate," he said hurriedly, not wanting to leave the situation as it was. Logan was waiting, however, and Berdan followed him out as bidden.

Martin walked into the office after he saw the visitors ride away. Tinsley's manner told him there had been a clash. "You had trouble with 'em, Clark?"

"Sit down, Henry," Tinsley told him. "We had some plain speaking. The trouble was up the river last night. That party of surveyors was run out of camp and their instruments smashed."

He gave Martin an account of what had occurred, as he had got it from Nip and Berdan. Continuing, he acquainted him with the purpose of their errand to P Bench and his refusal of their request. The foreman had no immediate answer. His thin face seemed to grow more cavernous as he retired into his shell. Finally, he said, "Nip won't come again. He's an unreasoning man, when he gets hostile. This thing will build up into a declaration of war in his mind and he'll spread the word. It leaves you only one way to jump."

"Teton Williams?"

Martin nodded gloomily. "You've said yourself that you can't be neutral."

Tinsley listened from his chair and his strong hands moved back and forth on the chair's arms in thoughtful contemplation. He was not concerned for himself over the stand he had taken with Logan and Berdan; he knew Martin's mind was filled with doubts and mis-

givings, and he wanted this man to understand. "My idea of a neutral, Henry, is a fellow who pulls in his horns when a war is going on all around him and keeps on backing up time after time just to keep out of it. That's not what I intend to do; I'll be in this fight up to the hilt before it's over. It couldn't be any other way. But I'm not pulling anyone's chestnuts out of the fire nor putting my okay on these raids and the rest of the hell that's due to break loose. If this water scheme is the grab that I think it is, I'll fight it; if it's on the level, I'll do my best to support it. I'll figure it out and play my own hand."

"I can go along with that," Martin declared, unhappy about it but loyal. "The price will be high. You'll be fighting both sides. One crowd will raid us and blame it on the other. The only way to beat it will be to turn P Bench into an armed camp; and we'll still have a cow ranch to run."

"All of that may be true," Tinsley acknowledged. "It all depends on how things shape up in the next two or three weeks. I'm going to ride over to the Flying W this afternoon and see Teton; I want to hear his side of the argument. Red says there's a trail through the Mustang Hills that'll save five miles."

"There is," Henry said. "It cuts across our south range. Better take him with you."

Tinsley gave him a quick glance. "Any reason why I shouldn't go alone?"

Though Martin said, "None in particular," his tone held an obscure reservation. "We never know who's drifting through the hills. Take Red with you and play it safe."

"I won't bother," Tinsley told him. "I'll get further with Teton if I show up alone. I don't want him or anyone else to get the idea that I can't ride where I please."

As a concession to Martin's vague anxiety, he carried

a rifle in a saddle boot when he pulled away from the house, shortly after dinner. The trail through the Mustangs was easily followed, long after he was beyond the P Bench line. In the days before the country had been fenced in and the railroad had arrived in Hays City, cattle had been driven over this trail to the towns on the Humboldt.

Observed at close range, these hills lost their rocky, barren look. The serrated ridges were treeless and uninviting but in the folds in between, cedar and yellow pine raised their green heads. The trail ran among them, opening at frequent intervals into small mountain meadows. The graze was good, but there was so little of it that the heart of the Mustangs was still in the public domain. In the past thirty years, however, great slices had been carved off by covetous stockmen with Morgan Tinsley and Teton Williams the chief beneficiaries.

Tinsley found Teton at home. The old man received him with manifest suspicion. "I remember you," he grumbled. "Yo're the young buck that stepped in between Grinell and me. I didn't know at the time that you were Morg Tinsley's son, but I know it now."

"I hope there's no hard feelings, Teton, because I helped Miss Eaton to break up that argument."

"I dunno as there is," was the testy answer. "There wouldn't have bin no call for you to step in if Ria hadn't grabbed my gun. I was never so mortified in my life. But there'll be more to that before it's finished. You know where I stand on this water business. Will you tell me what yo're doin' here?"

"Trying to find out where I stand," Tinsley replied, making it a point to be equally blunt. Teton gazed at him askance.

"Stand?" he snapped. "You stand where yore paw stood, don't you?"

"I don't know. I smell a rat in this deal."

"You do, eh? Wal, so do I! A forty thousand dollar rat!" Teton's laugh was shrill and cutting. "You've got a lot of money tied up in the company, or will have. It never was a Tinsley habit to buck its own money."

Clark grinned. "I know," he admitted. "I hope *I* won't have to do it. But I may. Speaking of Tinsley policy, you may have heard that we never throw good money after bad. I don't know what my water rights are worth to P Bench. Certainly many times forty thousand dollars. I'm going to make God-awful certain that nobody walks off with them and leaves me holding the bag. . . . There was trouble up the river last night. You've heard about it, of course?"

"Yeh, I heard about it. So what?"

"Berdan and Logan were at P Bench this morning. They're organizing a party of armed guards for the engineers. They asked me to supply some men for it. I said no."

"Did you?" Teton inquired with cutting sarcasm. "What do you want me to do—git down on my knees and thank you? I guess not! You won't git anywheres with me, playin' stool pigeon for that bunch, Tinsley!"

"That's foolish name calling." Tinsley's patience with the old man was wearing thin but he was in no danger of losing his temper. "I rode over here this afternoon for just one purpose; I wanted to hear your side of the story. As far as the water company is concerned, I'm nobody's man but my own. I was told that you're against the proposition only because you're a pig-headed old fool with as much water as you need, and that you don't give a damn about whether other people get theirs."

Tinsley had heard nothing of the sort. He wanted to unlock Teton's lips, and he succeeded beyond his expectations.

"Of all the dirty, mangy lies I ever heard, that takes the cake!" he exploded. "Sounds exactly like Win Berdan to me, the stinker!"

"You'll have to guess again," said Tinsley. "It wasn't Berdan. I haven't exchanged more than a dozen words with him."

"Wal, it sounds like him!" Teton insisted. "If they had kept him out of it, I might have bin roped in, I reckon. When I saw his smooth hand manipulatin' things, I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. He ain't no water user! He's got no water rights of any kind! But he's pourin' money into the scheme, ain't he? Why? What's he figgerin' to git out of it? Ask him, and he'll purr like a house cat and tell you it's all for the good of Hays City; the town's goin' to boom and everybody will be rich and happy! My foot! Win Berdan's no public spirited citizen; he's a dollar chaser! He smelled money, that's why he went all out to put the deal over!"

"The bonds can't be retired for fifteen years. At four percent, that's good investment for a banker." Tinsley was still fishing.

"He's gittin' six, seven, even eight percent on ranch mortgages! Why's he fiddlin' around with four percent bonds?" It was a question, but Teton had his own answer. "Because he's got his eye on sumthin' else. It ain't the stock; that was divided among the ones who turned in water rights. If he's got any, he's bought it from Grinell or somebody. I hope he's loaded up with a lot of it. He talks about it doublin' in value and payin' dividends. Who's goin' to use all that water? Cow ranches? Or is he goin' to turn 'em into truck farms?"

Teton had raised a point that had repeatedly occurred to Tinsley. Within a few months after the dam was completed, an ever-increasing abundance of water would be available. As Teton said—who was to use it? If every stockman in the valley bought double, or even

three times, the amount he had been taking out of the river, it would be only two or three years until it made little impression on the lake that would be backing up above the dam.

But now that he had induced Teton to open up, Tinsley needled him further by saying, "The water won't go begging. Speaking for P Bench, we can use three or four times what we've been getting."

"So can I, no matter what you bin told!" Teton retorted. "That won't add up to no big profits for the company! It ain't only the interest on the bonds they'll have to meet; there'll be wages to pay—ditch riders, office people, maintenance!"

Incensed as he was, he still had an eye for what went on around him. Tinsley and he were standing at the rear of the house. Across the yard, two men were having trouble getting a new corral gate to swing freely. "Hammerin' hell outa that gate won't do no good!" he yelled at them. "You got the hinges set too high! Take 'em off and lower 'em a bit!" Without a break, he continued his harangue with Clark. "No, sir! There's sumthin' that don't meet the eye!"

"Go ahead," Tinsley urged. "If you know what Berdan's hole card is—name it."

The old man started to blurt out a hot, impassioned answer, only to check himself and stand there shaking his head. "No, I ain't sayin'!" he ground out fiercely. "I ain't at liberty to say!"

Though Tinsley was ready to believe that Win Berdan had some ulterior purpose in mind, he was convinced that Teton was bluffing, in pretending to have information that he refused to disclose. He said, "I don't know how much you're holding back. One of these days you may put your finger on something and be free to talk about it. When you are, I hope you'll come to P Bench. I'll be glad to listen to anything you have to say.

In the meantime, I'm going to try to get some information from Maria Eaton."

"Hunh!" the old man cackled shrilly. "You won't git nuthin' out of Ria. That gal kin out-smart the best of you!"

Clark nodded, with a smile. "So I understand. But it's just possible that I may possess a bit of evidence that'll get me a hearing with her."

Teton drilled him with a glance. "What do you mean by that?"

Tinsley brushed him off with a laugh. "To use your words—I ain't at liberty to say."

The afternoon got to be well along as he retraced his way through the hills. Being in no hurry, he permitted his horse to make its own pace. Mulling over what Teton had had to say, he realized that much of it was based on a bigoted, personal hatred of Berdan. Tinsley refused to dismiss it on that account; the banker was, and had been from the first, the driving force behind the water project. His great interest in it certainly called for some explaining, since it could be presumed that he hoped to profit from his activities. Try as he would, Tinsley could hit upon no explanation as credible as the one Teton had advanced.

The old man had not so much as mentioned Harvey Stock, Jim Matthews of Bar Cross, Nate Jessup of Dog Iron or any of the other prominent stockmen allied with Berdan. His bias was against Berdan and Logan. It was so pronounced that it was impossible to escape wondering if the two men had a secret understanding that did not include the others.

The afternoon was so peaceful and Tinsley was so deep in his thoughts that he forgot even the faint sense of caution that had ridden with him to the Flying W. It came back to him with startling suddenness as he moved into the pines after crossing one of the little

meadows and chanced to turn in the saddle in time to see a horseman come to the far edge of the clearing, pull up there momentarily and then, apparently feeling he had not been detected, ride out into the open and begin circling around the meadow's edge.

The circumstance was peculiar enough to put Tinsley on guard. He jogged on, determined to discover at the next clearing if the interest of the rider on his back trail centered in him.

With an alertness that tightened his mouth and whipped a peculiar flatness into his face, he crossed the next meadow and pulled up well within the trees. In a matter of several minutes, the other appeared at the far edge, stopped only long enough to assure himself that he had the meadow to himself and then came on, not striking directly across but again keeping in close to the encircling cedars and pines.

Any doubt that he was being stalked by this silent, patient horseman, who rode with his rifle across his saddle bow, was instantly erased from Tinsley's mind. When he had caught his first glimpse of the man, he had found something familiar about him. Now, having him at closer range, he was absolutely certain that it was young Ritchie Eaton. He could not understand why young Eaton was tailing him. The rifle held so grimly and lightly was thoroughly understandable, however.

"He must have come up across Grinell's range this afternoon and spotted me going over to Teton's place," Tinsley muttered. "He's been laying out for me, knowing I'd be coming back this way. I'll give him one more chance to change his mind about jumping me. If he tails me across the next meadow, I'll hand him a surprise."

Several hundred yards of trail through the trees brought him to still another opening. He lost no time getting across. Once in among the trees again, he broke off the trail sharply and got out of the saddle. Making

sure that his horse was concealed, he ran back and dropped to his knees behind a fallen tree. Believing that a .44 would be sufficient for this business, he had left his rifle in the boot. It was his intention to take young Eaton by surprise as he passed, take his gun and after giving him a large piece of his mind, send him on his way.

He knew he would hear him coming long before he caught sight of him. With an ear cocked, he waited, nerveless and sure of himself. The minutes dragged by —as many as seven or eight—time enough for Eaton to have been passing, but there was no sound of his coming. "He's given up on me," Tinsley concluded.

In the act of getting to his feet, a rifle cracked somewhere behind him and a slug winged past his head with a wicked scream. His reaction was quick and definite. Covering his face with his hands, he flung himself to the ground and rolled up against the fallen tree. With the thunder of that first shot still rolling across the hills, the rifle crashed again. The second slug buried itself in the trunk of the fallen pine within inches of where he lay. "That kid can handle a gun," was his not altogether irrelevant thought.

The shots came from somewhere off to his left. Obviously, young Eaton had cut through the timber and got ahead of him. It was equally obvious to Tinsley that he couldn't remain where he was without being struck. Grasping the nub of a broken-off limb of the dead tree, he heaved himself over the trunk and lay there, hoping he'd draw another shot that would give him the sniper's position. It came quickly from a tangle of criss-crossed down timber, not so far to his left as he had first thought.

Keeping down, he crawled away from the tree and reached his horse. Pausing there only long enough to slip his rifle out of the boot, he moved on, describing a

wide quarter circle that brought him slightly to the rear and left of the young bushwhacker. From there, he was able to study the knot of dead trees carefully. He located Eaton's bronc, a few yards beyond, but could see nothing of the boy himself, who had burrowed down among the gnarled roots.

Presently, there was a movement there and Ritchie crawled into view. Tinsley let him get to his feet before he stepped out. "Hold it, and throw down your gun!" he commanded.

For answer, the youngster whipped his rifle to his shoulder and fired. Even that hurried shot missed its mark by only a narrow margin. Left no choice, Tinsley returned the shot, the bullet placing where he intended, between knee and hip. The impact knocked the youngster's feet out from under him and he lost his gun as he went down. Cat-like, on all fours, he started to crawl to it. Tinsley was ahead of him, however, and kicked the rifle out of reach.

"Your manners need improving, Ritchie," he whipped out gruffly. "That's yellow dog, ground sluicing a man. . . . Why are you out gunning for me?"

Though he was faint from pain, Eaton glared at him with challenging hostility. "Go ahead—finish me off, or clear out!" he grunted.

"No," said Tinsley. "I wouldn't have shot so low if I'd wanted to finish you off. I'm going to have a look at your leg, do what I can do to stop the bleeding and then I'm going to put you on your bronc and take you home. If you won't tell me why you were out to knock me off, maybe your sister will."

5

THE WOUND was a clean one, the slug having gone through without touching the bone. It was bleeding profusely. A tourniquet checked the flow. Tinsley's ministrations failed to arouse any gratitude in Eaton.

"It can't be so painful now," Tinsley said as he bound up the wound.

"Whatever it is, I can stand it!" Ritchie grunted. "You're making a lot out of nothing!"

"Yeh? You better wait until you hear what the doctor has to say. Even if you're lucky, you won't do any riding for a couple of weeks. Tailing me was a fool play. I had you spotted a long way back."

"I let you spot me. I figured you'd do just what you did. I had a lot of time. I was going over to Teton's myself, when I saw you heading that way. What were you up to—trying to turn him against us?"

"Suppose you ask him," Tinsley advised thinly. "You'll take Teton's word. Your harebrained nonsense will hurt your cause more than it'll help it. . . . Grab hold of my arm and try to help yourself to your feet. I'll set you in the saddle and we'll get moving."

Tinsley could imagine what his reception would be at the Eatons. Balanced against the fact that he was lucky to be alive, it didn't weigh too heavily on him.

Ritchie was a sullen figure as they rode along. Tinsley rode close behind. Neither had anything to say until they reached P Bench range. Moving up, Tinsley said,

"Head straight for the river. We'll keep wide of the house."

Ritchie's leg was stiffening. Try as he would, he could not hold back an occasional grunt of pain. By the time they reached the Sweetwater, he was in agony. It took some of the truculence out of him. Knowing what he had waiting for him at home didn't help him any. He had given it little consideration at first, but it filled his mind now.

"I'm in a hell of a mess," he muttered tragically as they forded the river. "I don't want Ria to know about this. . . . Do you have to take me to the house, Tinsley? I'll talk; I'll tell you what you want to know."

"All of a sudden, Ritchie, you don't sound so tough," said Tinsley. "You sound more like a boy who's got over his head. You can't be more than nineteen. As for telling me why you tried to knock me off, you needn't bother; I've figured that out. For some reason, you're dead sure I can prove you had a finger in setting Grinell's hay afire. Right?"

"Mebbe," the boy muttered glumly.

Tinsley said, "I knew it! I don't know who tipped you off. It doesn't matter, I hear things, too—like the story you've been spreading about Grinell having been paid to burn his hay, so that the big interests behind the water company could whip up feeling against you folks. . . . No, Ritchie, I'm not giving you an opportunity to turn this business against me; I'm going to make sure your sister gets the truth about that bullet hole in your leg."

Talk died there. It was after five o'clock, and they still had several miles to go. There was no one on the road at the time, but when they were within half a mile of the Eatons, two horsemen trotted into view.

"Who will this be?" Tinsley inquired.

"Looks like Les Dufors and his brother Remy."

The name was not new to Tinsley. He ran back through his mind and recalled the man who had supported Teton Williams that first morning in Hays City.

"It's Les and Remy," Eaton muttered, a few minutes later. He flicked a calculating glance at Tinsley. "What are you going to tell them?"

Understanding flowed into the tall man's eyes. He said, "If you're playing around with the idea that they're going to take you away from me, forget it. When we meet up with them, just keep on moving."

It wasn't to go that way, however. Les Dufors knew, as apparently everyone did, that the tall stranger who had appeared in Hays City was Clark Tinsley. He recognized him at once and passed the word to his brother. When they saw Ritchie's bandaged leg and noted his drawn look, together with the fact that Tinsley was very definitely riding herd on the boy, their interest soared.

They came on without giving any indication of stopping, but when only a few feet separated them from the youngster and Clark, they pulled up sharply and swung their horses across the road.

"What's the idea of this, Ritchie?" Les Dufors called out. "What's happened to you?"

Eaton was sorely tempted to try and make the most of the situation. He knew he had only to twist the truth and accuse Tinsley of making an unprovoked attack on him. That would be enough for Les and Remy, both notorious hotheads. Once tempers flared, they wouldn't stop short of a showdown. He saw Tinsley watching him closely. There was something in the man's icy composure that laid a heavy hand on Ritchie.

"Answer him," Tinsley grunted. "Give him a straight answer."

After a moment's sulking hesitation, Ritchie said, "We had an argument up in the hills, Les. I got the worst of it."

"Did he give you a fair chance?" Remy demanded.

"Yeh, he gave me a fair chance."

"What's fair about a grown man shootin' it out with a kid?" Les growled. "That all you got to do with your time, Tinsley?"

"Don't worry about my time," Clark returned. "If you've got any to spare, get a doctor for this kid. Is there one short of Hays City?"

"No, there ain't," Remy spoke up. "I'll turn around and go back to town. . . . Where you takin' Ritchie?"

"Home."

"Okay!" Remy turned to his brother. "You go along with them, Les. Wait at the Eatons till I git out with Doc Perry. You tell Ria I'll fetch him as soon as I can."

He swung his bronc and was soon flashing up the road. His passing was noticed at the Eatons, and when Tinsley turned in with Ritchie and Les Dufors, Maria and her mother hurriedly left the gallery and ran out to meet them. The bloodstained bandage on Ritchie's leg, as well as his haggard appearance, told them at a glance that he had either met with an accident or been in a gunfight. Though their anxiety was great, they did not permit it to run away with them. That was especially true of white-haired Elena Eaton, still a comely-looking woman, whose dignity and poise impressed Tinsley.

"Ritchie, you're hurt," she said. "Is it serious?"

"No, Mom. Just my leg."

"Joe is out in back," she told him. "I'll ring the bell for him and have him find your father."

She gave Tinsley a glance as she was turning away and nodded to herself as she found enough of the father in him to tell her who he was.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Eaton," Dufors remembered to tell her. "Remy has gone for Doc Perry."

Tinsley found Maria regarding him with puzzled eyes. "What is the meaning of this? And why are you here?"

"Miss Eaton, I'm here because I wanted you to get the truth about this business. It was a slug from my rifle that ploughed through Ritchie's leg. He had taken a couple pot shots at me before I could do anything about it. When I called on him to throw down his gun, he let me have another one. I figured if I wanted to go on living, I had to drop him. He can tell you what happened, or I will."

"Ritchie, is this true?" she cried, her reserve failing her for the moment. Tinsley thought how much she resembled her mother, the same cleanly carved features and intelligent eyes and that same intangible something that made him feel her deep inner strength.

Ritchie was in no hurry to answer her. Finally, he said, "I was shooting at him, all right." He turned to Tinsley, with a desperate air. "Go on, tell her! Get it over with!"

"You want Dufors to hear it?" Clark asked.

In the backyard, the ranch bell was sounding a peremptory summons.

"What difference does it make?" Ritchie muttered. "If you're going to use it against me, everybody will know."

Without saying yes or no to that, Tinsley related what had occurred in the hills. A stunned, incredible look settled in Maria's eyes as her glance went from him to her brother and back. At the end she said, "It's true, Ritchie! But I can't believe it! After all I've said! How could you do a thing like that? What reason could you have had for wanting to kill this man?"

"Because I don't like the company he keeps! We know where he stands. What was the idea of him going to Flying W if it wasn't to try to turn Teton away from us and get him to jump back with the other big spreads? He denies it, but I ain't changing my mind!"

"And that was reason enough for what you tried to do? Ritchie, you must be mad! I've been up and down

this valley, day after day, ever since Berdan began talking about diverting the Sweetwater, pleading with everyone who'd listen that we must organize and stand firm against this aggression. You know what I hoped to do; you've been at all of the meetings. I felt if there was anyone I could count on, it was you, Ritchie. . . . How could you do this to me? You must have realized that you were throwing away everything I've worked so hard to accomplish."

"Don't keep me sitting here, reading the riot act to me," the youngster burst out. "Les, you and Tinsley get me down and carry me into the house."

"No, not until I've finished," Maria interjected. "You had no reason to doubt Teton; no one can buy him off or frighten him with their threats. I won't be fooled, Ritchie; I know this talk about Teton is just something you made up. I want the truth."

"All right, you can have it!" Ritchie said fiercely. "Tinsley knows too much. I figured it was just a question of time when he'd go to Ruxton with it and I'd be in the soup."

His mother had just rounded the corner of the house. Her quick, smothered gasp of anguish was proof enough that she had heard. Thinking to spare her and Maria, Tinsley said, "I know what Ritchie is going to say. No matter what he thinks about it, I'm sure, Miss Eaton, that you and your mother would prefer Dufors not to hear it."

Maria thanked him with her eyes and turned to Dufors. He nodded and said, "I'll walk down to the corral."

"Go ahead," Tinsley urged, after Dufors left. "I want to know where you got your information."

Ritchie sat there, head bowed, his fingers tightly laced around the horn of his saddle. "I put it together myself. You were in Virgil Smith's barber shop, getting shaved, the morning you hit Hays City. Virgil heard Buck ques-

tioning you. Virg told me what you said about camping below the spring in the cedars. I went up there and found the ashes of your fire. I knew you were there when we rode by and heard one of the boys call out my name and tell me to wait up at the spring. You didn't say anything to Buck about what you saw and heard, but you had it on me. I was sure of that."

Tinsley saw that Maria didn't understand. "It was the night Grinell's hay was burned," he told her. "You can draw your own conclusions—if that is necessary. I understood you knew all about it."

"No! No!" she cried. "Ritchie—you were against me even then! No wonder you and the boys you run with were so quick to claim the fire was set by Grinell himself! Needless to say, you had a hand in raiding the camp." She shook her head hopelessly. "How can I forgive you, Ritchie? You've hurt our cause a hundred times more than you've helped it."

Elena Eaton said, "Let me speak, Ria." She addressed herself to Tinsley. "You're Morgan Tinsley's son. I knew your father well. . . . Will you tell me what you propose to do with Ritchie?"

"I'm not inclined to do anything, Mrs. Eaton. I don't believe that making an example of him will accomplish as much as holding my evidence over his head. I don't hold him altogether responsible for what he's done. After all, he's only a boy—playing at being a man. I know how that goes; it wasn't so long ago that I was nineteen. You can't preach bitterness and violence to boys and not expect them to take it on themselves to do something about it."

Maria's chin went up and a flush of indignation flowed into her cheeks. "I presume that's meant for me," she said coldly. "You're mistaken, Mr. Tinsley, if you understand that I've been preaching hatred and violence. I'm not naïve enough to think this fight will be

decided without violence, but I've said all along that we'd defeat ourselves if we were the first to resort to it."

"That's not the way I've got it," Tinsley said quietly. "I've been told right and left that you are the real spearhead of the fight against the water company; that it was you who organized the opposition and welded it together. Along with many others, I took it for granted that what has been happening had your approval."

"No, far from it," Maria declared tensely. "I've done my best to arouse our people and keep them vigilant. I know that passive resistance will do more for us than violence. Mr. Berdan may think this fight is over—he won the voting by means best known to himself—but this matter will still be decided in court, and we'll go in with clean hands if I have anything to say about it."

Her sincerity impressed Tinsley. He could understand why such men as hard-bitten Teton Williams and others like Les and Remy Dufors had rallied around her. He said, "I hope you'll have a great deal to say about it, Miss Eaton. I'd like to see this trouble settled short of a long and bloody war. But just settling it, either by legal means or smoking guns, won't bring peace to the valley unless both sides are satisfied to accept it. That means compromise, and I don't see any disposition anywhere to compromise. If you'll call Dufors, we'll carry Ritchie into the house."

Maria went at once and her mother reached up and placed her hand on the boy's. "You are feverish, Ritchie. Does your leg pain you so?"

Ritchie shook his head. "No feeling in it at all, Mom. It's like it was dead."

"That's the tourniquet, Mrs. Eaton," said Tinsley. "I'd wait and let the doctor remove it. The wound should be washed out immediately with a strong antiseptic. I didn't have anything to work with; I did the best I could."

"I appreciate it, Mr. Tinsley." Elena hesitated, pondering that simple statement and her fine eyes were distressed. "We were always careful never to allow ourselves to become indebted to your father," she continued, "and we had not expected to become indebted to you. But we are. It would be foolish not to acknowledge it. I hope Ritchie appreciates the consideration you're showing him. He could have been sent to prison."

"I may wind up there even yet," Ritchie muttered. "He can always change his mind. And why should he be doing us a favor? The Tinsleys have bucked us ever since I can remember. We've always had Owyhee Livestock on our necks."

"That attitude doesn't surprise me," said Tinsley. "For what it may be worth, you better learn to take me as you find me. I'm not doing you any favor, kid, I'm just giving you a chance to write your own ticket with me. If you go hog wild a second time, it won't end this way."

Maria returned with Dufors and a tired-looking man who had the faltering step of one obviously in ill health. "This is my father," she said.

Tinsley bowed. Frank Eaton jerked a cold, unfriendly nod and said, "I reckon I've got the details of this shooting straight in my mind. Shooting a man in the back has never been my style. I condemn it even if my own son's at fault. I'm not offering it as an excuse, Tinsley, but I can tell you that when a lad sees his people fighting range hogs—and water hogs—all his life and begins to realize what he's going to have ahead of him when he grows up, it does something to him."

Maria and her mother turned to him beseechingly and Maria said, "Please, Father, don't say any more."

"Just one thing," he insisted. "The last time Morgan Tinsley was here I told him never to set foot on this ranch again. I want this man to understand that that

goes for him. He needn't get down; Les and I will carry Ritchie in."

Dufors and he lifted the boy from the saddle and took him to the house. Mrs. Eaton went with them. Maria lifted her eyes to Tinsley, and they held a deep regret.

"I'm sorry for everything," she murmured. "I can't expect you to understand; you're on one side of this quarrel and I'm on the other. Our parts were written out for us many years ago, when we were only children. We're caught in the web of this thing; we couldn't change it if we wanted to."

He leaned toward her with his answer. "If we were disposed to change it," he said with tender soberness, "don't say we couldn't, Maria!"

She shook her head ever so slightly. "No, it's too late for that. We'll fight each other to a finish. I only hope the two of us can make it a fair fight."

Tinsley smiled at her fondly. "You may have occasion to change your mind about me and what I will —or won't—fight for. . . . Do you ever ride in the afternoon?"

"Steamboat Butte—if the wind isn't blowing," was her unexpected answer.

Tinsley touched his hat. "Maybe I'll be lucky enough to find you there some time." Swinging his horse with a graceful movement of arm and body, he got away with a rush.

Maria stood there, following him with her eyes until he reached the road. "Clark Tinsley—" she whispered to herself. "Why couldn't he have been someone else?"

6

DURING ITS long and uncertain existence, the Hays City *Dispatch* had never been published oftener than three times a week, until enterprising young Del Robinson had taken it over, a few months back, and made it a daily. Del was his own editor. Finding a lead story for his front page often taxed his ingenuity. That problem had vanished with the first announcement of the proposed Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association, and ever since, the flow of news concerning it had been as constant and abundant as the promoters of the company claimed their water would be, once the Sweetwater had been harnessed.

Conservation and reclamation were ten-dollar words in an arid, semi-desert country. Del hurled them at his readers again and again, painting a glowing picture of the prosperity that awaited Hays City and the valley of the Sweetwater. Since Berdan was operating on money borrowed from the bank he and his associates never had any reason to complain about what the *Dispatch* had to say regarding the enterprise. In his columns, Del acknowledged that there was opposition to the venture, but he made light of it and called it misguided and unenlightened.

Though it was noted that there were no P Bench men among the armed guards that the company had recruited, and speculation as to what it meant was rife, the *Dispatch* took no notice of it. Other items were reported at length, however. The contract for the dam

and canal had been given to a Portland construction company. When a trainload of bulldozers, steam shovels and slip scrapers arrived in Hays City, to be followed a few hours later by a special bringing mules, laborers, more equipment and the contractor's commissary department, the *Dispatch* greeted the fact with banner headlines.

Townley and his assistants had staked out the dam a second time and were proceeding down the valley, locating the course of the canal. Whether due to the presence of the guards, or not, no further violence had occurred. Since leaving the dam site, the surveyors had been running their levels on public land, so barren and worthless that even the Basque sheepmen had given up on it. Another day or two would bring them to Jerry Downs' line. There, Hays City believed, the uneasy peace that had hung over the town for a week and more would end abruptly.

Win Berdan made it a point to appear confident that the work would go on without interruption. Secretly, he entertained some grave doubts as to what was going to happen. He had taken several minor rebuffs recently that made him realize he was not going to have the easy sailing he had counted on. Nip Logan came to see him, early in the morning of the day before Townley was expected to reach Downs' fence. Behind the closed door of his private office, Berdan reluctantly expressed his growing concern.

"They'll back down, I tell you," Logan urged. "There may be a shot or two fired, but they'll run like sheep when they see what they're up against. Jest to make sure things go our way, I'll send Bill Starr and another man or two up this evenin'. Bill won't take no nonsense from Downs and his friends. . . . You seen anythin' of young Tinsley?"

"Not a thing! He hasn't been near the bank!" Win

tapped his desk nervously. "We're going to have trouble with him, Nip. He sent Martin in with the check for the second payment on the bonds. I'll say he was prompt enough with it, but there's no question that it's coming to a clean break with him. I thought that little run-in we had with him about letting us have a couple men could be patched up. He evidently doesn't want it patched up."

"To hell with him!" Logan bit off the end of a fresh cigar with a savage snap. "Got his head full of soft ideas he picked up at college! That was Morg's mistake—givin' his boys too much education! It takes a long time for it to wear off. Some of the things he's been spoutin' have come back to me second-hand through my crew. Wants a fair deal for everybody, he says! Wants peace! Compromise! Aw hell! Don't bother with him, Win!"

"I'm not running after him," Berdan said emphatically. "He's been in town two, three or four times recently. Comes in to see Carter. Old Britt's been spending a lot of time in the county clerk's office going over the records. I reckon he found what he was looking for; you can't cover up a cancelled mortgage."

"Suppose he did find it? What good will it do him? Sam Grinell won't say anythin'. Where he got the money to pay the bank is his own business. Carter can suspect whatever he damn pleases. . . . I'm takin' your word for it that you've got the deal with the Government tied up so there won't be no leak."

"You bet I have it tied up!" Berdan assured him, with a confident grin. "I'll keep it on ice until we're all set. You was speaking about Grinell. I can't entirely agree with you, Nip, that we don't need to worry about Sam; he was well taken care of, but the fire cost him around a thousand dollars. No insurance, of course. At first, he was dead certain that Teton had a hand in setting that blaze. He's backed down on that, after talking to Lamb;

Tom told him he had no evidence that would stand up in court."

"What's Ruxton done about it?" Logan inquired.

"He hasn't turned up a thing. That's what is bothering Sam; he figures he won't get damages from anyone, so he feels that we ought to make the loss good."

"The hell he does!" Logan brought his chair down on all fours with an angry bang. "He's got another think comin'! Why didn't he watch his hay. It ain't up to us to give him another cent!"

"I know it isn't," Berdan agreed. His tone was not as positive as usual, however. "He was pretty well worked up about it, Nip, so I didn't give him a flat turn-down. I told him we'd see what we could do about it. We can't afford to make an enemy of Sam Grinell. He's a tough man to handle when he gets his dander up."

"Hunh! It's a bit late to be findin' that out!" The florid-faced owner of Double Diamond chewed his cigar furiously. "We didn't need his vote, but you thought we did."

"I wanted to be on the safe side, Nip. I can string him along. If he comes to you, refer him to me. God knows we don't want him wagging his jaw about how we got the votes. It would raise such a stink that the attorney-general would be forced to order an investigation."

"Investigation, my foot!" Nip grunted. "Why are you always harkin' about it? You mentioned it the last time I was in. We had the votes, didn't we? That settled it. . . . Who's goin' to make us trouble? Britt Carter?"

Berdan removed the nose glasses he always wore when he was at his desk and polished them carefully. "Britt's old, but I'm not underestimating him," he said precisely. "He hasn't been digging through the records for nothing. If he's working for young Tinsley—and I believe he is—he might make us a lot of trouble. When he gets his teeth into anything, he hangs on. Give him

any reason to believe that Grinell is at odds with us, and he'll make the most of it. That's why I want to be diplomatic with Sam."

"Go ahead! Be diplomatic!" Logan consented irascibly. "That's the difference between you and me, Win. I believe in comin' down hard with both feet and callin' a spade a spade; you always have to butter up a man. You'd have tried it, with Tinsley even when he gave us a flat no if I hadn't been along with you. . . . Has Ruxton been sayin' anythin' about what he's goin' to do if Townley runs into trouble gittin' across Downs' range?"

"Just that he'll be up there." Berdan shoved an ash tray to the corner of his desk for Nip's use. He didn't smoke himself and it annoyed him no end to have ashes spread around his office by those who did. "I called him in yesterday and reminded him that it's one of the provisions of our charter that we have the legal right to run our lines across private property and subsequently condemn a right of way. He told me he was aware of it. I put it up to him again to deputize our guards. He refused to do it. I got the same story he gave us when we first sent the men up; if it becomes necessary to deputize anybody, he'll hand pick his own men." The banker didn't bother to hide his displeasure. "I don't care whether you come down on him with both feet or try to butter him up, as you call it, Buck Ruxton isn't going to be pushed around. He knows he's got the town behind him and can be reelected as often as he cares to run."

"That's nothin' new!" Nip ignored the ash tray and flicked the ash from his cigar on the floor. "I never figgered he could be pushed around—either by us or the opposition. If he keeps to the middle of the road, that's good enough for me. We got the law on our side, Win; it'll be time enough for us to git excited when he refuses

to back it up. I'm goin' to git out of here now; I got some things to do in town. I'll be waitin' to hear how things go. You needn't bother gittin' word to me; I'll have one of my men do it."

Logan was back at the door, a moment after he had stepped out, to add: "If we need reinforcements, we can git 'em."

The tension that rested so heavily on Hays City was reflected in a lesser degree on the whole valley. Tinsley caught it in the guarded talk of his crew. Though the men were miles away from the point where the expected clash was to come, they seemed to be well informed. It was so noticeable that he attempted to sound out Red Lucas. "You boys have heard something," he said. "Where did you get your information? Grundy's Ford?"

The red-haired one was immediately vague and evasive. "There's somethin' cookin'," he averred. "All we been doin' is tryin' to put two and two together. Purdy and Johnnie Parr was down to Grundy's Ford last night. All they brought back was some loose talk."

"What do you mean by putting two and two together?" Tinsley asked, trying to pin him down.

"Wal, Ria Eaton has been ridin' up and down the valley from mornin' till night for the past couple days. Old Teton's been on the gallop, too. All that ridin' means they're gittin' their heads together about somethin'. I saw Carson Platt drivin' to town this mornin'. This is the first time that old Mormon's bestirred himself, but he's lined up solid with them. There's a lot of Mormons in Hays City. Carson Platt's an elder; he's got plenty to say among his people. Mebbe they're goin' to git into this scrap."

"You jump to some unwarranted conclusions, Red," Tinsley declared banteringly. "I don't suppose it would be possible that Platt was just going into town on business connected with his ranch."

"Not this mornin'," Red insisted. "He had Bud Downs, Jerry's son, with him. They had the kid's bronc tied to the endgate of the rig. Why would Bud be goin' back with him like that if there wasn't somethin' doin'?"

Tinsley shook his head and confessed his inability to give him a sound answer. "I'll have to say as Smoky so often does, it looks a mite queer. Dinny is setting a shoe on the bay. When he's finished, bring the horse up to the house."

They were parting, when Red said: "Boss, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"When you rode to Flyin' W, a week or so ago, did somebody throw lead at you?"

Tinsley was able to dissemble his surprise behind a wide grin. "You didn't see any scratches on me, did you? What makes you ask?"

"Henry had me ridin' our north fence yesterday afternoon, spottin' posts that need replacin'. On the way in, I came down along the P Bench-Double Diamond line and ran into Steve Jennings and a couple boys that Bill Starr had out with a fencin' wagon, stringin' new wire below Spit Cat Canyon. The old fence was down for about a hundred yards, so I rode over to the wagon to shoot the breeze with them for a couple minutes. Somehow, they didn't seem as glad to see me as I figgered they should, seein' as how I've known 'em for years and Steve and me are what you might call good friends. Some assorted cracks was made about lovin' thy neighbor and peace bein' wonderful. It didn't take me long to git their drift. I gave 'em back as good as I got, or a little better. I can sling as much language as any of them fellas."

Tinsley laughed. "What did you tell them, Red?"

"I told 'em I was still wearin' a gun and that nobody

had asked me to turn in my chaps for a pair of lace panties." Red scratched his head reflectively. "There was more. I can't remember it, but it must have been good. It shut 'em up, and then Steve gits off his high horse and tells me he was up in the Mustangs one afternoon a week or so ago and heard some shootin'. I check him up on it and it turns out to be the afternoon you went over to see Teton."

"Nothing wrong with your friend Steve's ears," Tinsley declared nonchalantly. "I heard two or three shots myself." He had no intention of disclosing what had occurred. "I was on my way home. It must have been getting on toward five o'clock."

Red was not completely taken in my this. "So Steve said," he muttered skeptically, only to add: "Reckon it was just someone knockin' over a coyote."

Tinsley nodded. "That's what I thought."

He started away, but Red wasn't finished, however.

"Bill Starr rode up to the wagon as I was talkin' to Steve. He told me I was on the wrong side of the line; to git back where I belonged and stay there."

"And what else?"

"That he didn't give a damn how you ran P Bench, but the fence was the deadline as far as Double Diamond was concerned. He gave Steve and the boys hell for havin' anythin' to do with me. I dropped back across the line and told that rat-eyed galoot what I thought of him. I know Bill Starr, Boss. It don't do any good to walk wide of him; give that bird an inch and he'll take a foot on you every time."

"Then don't give him an inch," Tinsley advised, the grimness of his tone surprising Red.

"You mean that, Boss?" The red-haired one's plain face lit up eagerly.

"I mean that we're not going to be pushed around by anyone. . . . You bring my horse up to the house."

Tinsley continued on his way, realizing he had voiced a far-reaching decision. It wasn't a case of snap judgment on his part; he was only holding to the course he had set himself from the first.

On leaving P Bench in the late afternoon, he forded the Sweetwater and struck off to the southwest for Steamboat Butte. It was the second time he had ridden there, in the hope of meeting Ria. He had not only been disappointed on the previous occasion but was aware that, with the situation up the valley coming to a head, he was likely to have no better luck today. Though he could hardly expect her to divulge her plans to him, he felt he had to see her before the showdown came at Downs' line. That feeling was so strong in him that he resolved to go to the Eatons and try to see her there if he failed to find her at the butte.

When he was two miles west of the river, he passed the last fence and had open country ahead of him—a vast, rolling plain, with Steamboat Butte rising in majestic, lonely grandeur from the gray-green sea of sagebrush. A vivid imagination was required to see in the butte any marked resemblance to a steamboat, but viewed at a certain angle, it remotely suggested an old-time Mississippi River stern-wheeler.

The bow and sides of this mythical steamboat fell sheer for several hundred feet, offering no hope of being scaled. At the stern, however, it was possible to ascend, a sure-footed horse being able to reach the crest by easy stages. From that eyrie, a desert sunset was a moving, magnificent spectacle to behold. Ria had discovered it long ago and its spell had never lost its magic for her, nor had the long ride home in the afterglow, with approaching night putting the valley to sleep with its soft, floating layers of mauve and purple.

Even in these troubled times, she never returned from a ride to the butte without feeling refreshed and forti-

fied. Frank Eaton couldn't understand it. "Why you should ride a dozen miles to watch a sunset, when you can see the whole thing from the back porch, is beyond me," he said more than once. Elena, wiser than he, knew it was the peace of mind she found there, even more than the sunset, that took Ria back again and again.

Tinsley had been following a trail of fresh horse tracks for some time before they broke through his day dreaming and registered on his mind. Finally aware of them, he saw that they were heading directly for Steamboat Butte. Though he had little to warrant that conclusion, he chose to believe it was Ria who had just passed. He used the spurs and began to move faster.

Though he still had a long four miles to go, the air in this high country was so clear that distance deceived the eye. Ignoring the illusion that Steamboat Butte was just a long skip and a jump away, he searched the plain as he pressed on. Topping a low swell, he was rewarded by sight of a bobbing speck far ahead that gradually resolved itself into a rider, moving leisurely in the direction of the butte. Quickening his pace, he drew up rapidly and was delighted to discover that the rider was Ria.

She saw him a minute later and waited for him.

"So you found the way," she said as he pulled up beside her.

"I found it the other day," he told her, thinking how pretty she was in her divided skirt and shirtwaist. He had no patience with ranch girls who went about in faded overalls and a man's woolen shirt. "It was last Monday, to be exact. A perfect afternoon. No wind blowing at all."

Ria laughed, remembering her reference to the wind. "I couldn't get away. I've been very busy."

"So I understand," said Tinsley, regarding her with a lingering, reverent attention. The impact of this girl

was a strong and living thing in him and could not be completely dissembled. "I had made up my mind that if I didn't see you here I'd stop at the house on the way back and try to see you, even at the risk of being run off the ranch."

"There's something important you wanted to say?" she queried, with pretended gaiety.

"No—just that I'm worried about you. I know a showdown of one sort or another is coming up tomorrow. I was in town yesterday. You could feel it in the air. I catch it even on the P Bench. . . . I don't know what your plans are, and I don't expect you to tell me. But I want you to be careful; I don't want you to make a mistake, Ria."

She searched his face briefly, trying to measure the depth of the concern he expressed for her. She pulled her eyes away then and did not speak until surprise had run out of her. "We knew this was coming," she said. "We've had time to prepare for it. If what I think you mean by 'mistake' occurs tomorrow, it won't be committed by us . . . Shall we ride on to the butte?"

Tinsley asked about Ritchie.

"He gets about the house, on crutches. In another week or so, he'll be riding again. Somehow, he isn't as difficult to get along with as I thought he'd be. This experience has calmed him down; he seems to have grown up suddenly."

"I only hope it's taught him a lesson," said Tinsley.

"I know it has, Clark. I wish I were as sure of some of the other boys as I am of Ritchie. He has very little to say about it, but he appreciates the consideration you are showing him. We all do, even Father. Of course, if the truth comes out about the fire, Ritchie will have to face it, along with the others."

They spoke of many things as they continued on to the butte, their horses often held to a walk. Conversa-

tion came easily enough when it concerned the rugged grandeur of Steamboat Butte, with Ria pointing out how they were to ascend it and promising him a sublime view from the crest. It was not an inexhaustible subject, however, and when they turned to other things, it was always to come back to the partisan strife that had the valley divided against itself. She mentioned the fact that there were no P Bench men among the guards that Berdan and Logan had organized.

"Some people say it means you have broken with the other big brands," she told him.

"No, Ria, I haven't broken with anyone. Berdan and the rest of them may choose to think I have. They're free to think whatever they please. When they came to P Bench for men, I said it meant war; that if the only way they put their proposition over was at gun point, I wanted no part of it. I'm not going to be led around by the nose—not by them or anyone else."

Ria brushed an imaginary fly from her mare's ear and said: "Aren't you being a little inconsistent? Owyhee Livestock—and that now means you—will be one of the company's principal bondholders."

"I expected that." A smile moved across Tinsley's mouth. "Sounds as though you had been talking to old Teton."

"At least once a day," she acknowledged. "He's cantankerous but he doesn't miss very much."

"And he's a stubborn, biased, hate-ridden old man," Tinsley added. "If he's told you what I had to say to him, then you know how I feel about the commitment my father made on the bonds. I told him, and I told Berdan, that I'd honor it. I don't intend to let it hamstring me, Ria."

She shook her head, unable to understand these apparent contradictions. "I'm afraid you're trying to straddle the fence, Clark. There was never anything indefinite

about your father; he was either for a proposition or against it. You seem to lean both ways."

"I have my convictions," he said. "A diverting dam and reservoir would help all of us; it would develop all the power we're likely to need for years to come, and we'd have water available in the really dry years. The Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association is something else again. I've kept away from Berdan, but I never go to town that I don't sit down with Britt Carter for an hour or two. He's filled me in on what I wanted to know. Not one of the arguments the company advanced justified the wholesale surrender of natural water rights, nor can I find any good reason for building a high dam and turning the Sweetwater into a dry wash. Teton had plenty to say to me about who was going to use all this water the company is going to back up. I couldn't give him an answer. I asked Britt just yesterday who was going to buy it. All he could do was shake his head and tell me he didn't know."

"Well, you have been asking yourself questions!" Ria exclaimed, with a tense, excited laugh. "Don't tell me you agree with us that there's something here that doesn't meet the eye."

Tinsley's eyes held hers for a long moment, and he was suddenly very sober. "Would you be greatly surprised if I said I did?"

"No, I wouldn't, Clark," she said simply. "I know you're far too intelligent to be fooled for long by the dishonesty of this miserable scheme that will ruin most of us if it can't be stopped. If they had been satisfied to divert only a part of the river flow and left us our water rights, we might not have realized how crooked the whole thing was until it was too late for us to do anything. Mr. Berdan and Mr. Nip Logan were just a bit too greedy for their own good."

Again it was Berdan and Logan, as it had been with

Teton Williams, who were singled out as the culprits.

"I gather, from what you and Teton have to say that it's all Berdan and Logan. What about Harvey Stock and the others? Is it your idea that they've had the wool pulled over their eyes and don't know what this is all about?"

"Oh, no!" Ria protested. "There may be some innocent dupes among them, but certainly not Harvey Stock, Jim Matthews of Bar Cross and Nate Jessup of Dog Iron. They're big outfits and they need water—lots of it—and they're perfectly willing to turn some sharp corners to get it. I don't believe they have anything in mind beyond that. I suspect they may know by now what they've let themselves in for and can't do anything but go along with it."

Tinsley glanced at her admiringly. He could feel her womanliness even when she spoke like a man. Ria turned his way without warning and caught him smiling.

"Do I sound so amusing?" she asked.

"Far from it. I was just thinking how lucky your people are to have someone with your spirit and clear thinking to lead them. I find myself wishing I were on your side."

The long curve came back to Ria's lips. "Would it be such a difficult jump, Clark?"

"It would take some thinking." Tinsley rode along without saying more for a minute or two, his eyes, if not his thoughts, fixed on the butte; which was so near now that every cranny and crevice stood revealed. Finally, he said out of his long silence, "Teton tried to make me believe that you folks know what Berdan and Nip have up their sleeve. You don't know, of course. If you did, you'd use it for all it was worth; you couldn't afford not to use a powerful weapon like that."

"I'll set your mind at ease," Ria said without hesita-

tion. "Frankly, we don't know what the game is. We have an idea, but we can't put a finger on anything definite. At first, I thought they planned to develop so much power at the dam that it would be profitable to run a line down to Winnemucca and the other towns along the Humboldt. I discarded that idea after a careful investigation convinced me that they couldn't hope to sell enough current to justify the expense of building a hundred and ten miles of power line."

"You may be able to turn up something and make it stick," Tinsley remarked. "I've had a hunch or two, but that's not enough for me; I want some evidence that they're dealing from the bottom before I declare myself."

"They'll show their hand sooner or later, Clark." Ria spoke with quiet confidence. "That won't be the end of it; we'll still have a battle on our hands to regain our water rights; but when we can confront them with proof of their guilt, perhaps it will clarify the situation for you and we can make the fight together."

The tall man's face thinned soberly. "I don't know, Ria. . . . I'm afraid my support might embarrass you more than it would help. Can you imagine Teton Williams or Les Dufors, to name only two, placing any confidence in me? To them and to a good many others, I'm P Bench—Owyhee Livestock—just another Tinsley. You can't change the past, Ria. Even your own father would distrust my motive if I threw in with you. It could very easily weaken your own position. Men would forget what you have done for them and begin to ask themselves why you had brought me into your camp."

They had reached the foot of the butte. They pulled up, not speaking for a moment. Ria ran her hand idly through the mare's mane, her young face thoughtful and preoccupied. She turned in the saddle then and her

eyes lifted to him. Something ran between them, as they sat there, that was rich with understanding.

"I'd risk all that to have you with us," she murmured. "I know I should never regret it."

The spell of her engulfed Tinsley and words came to his lips that he had not meant to utter. "When you need me, Ria, I'll be there—no matter how things stand."

7

"WHEN I come here alone," Ria said, as she and Tinsley began the long ascent to the top of Steamboat Butte, "I always make it a rule to leave my troubles behind and just enjoy the view and the sunset."

He was happy to agree with her. "There's one thing about trouble," he declared philosophically; "you can leave it behind for an hour or two, but there's no danger of mislaying it. It'll be here, waiting for us, when we come down."

Ria led the way to the crest. When they reached it, Tinsley had his first good look at the lower valley of the Sweetwater. To the west, the country changed to barren desert in two or three miles, bereft even of sagebrush, with great alkali flats shimmering in the rays of the westering sun. To the south and southeast, the land appeared more hospitable, the rolling plain around the butte continuing in that direction as far as the eye could see and comprising an area of several hundred square miles but obviously too poor to support even sheep. A bluish blur along the horizon indicated a mountain range. He asked Ria what they were.

"The Calico Mountains," she explained. "According to the geologists, the Sweetwater reached the Calicos at one time, centuries ago, of course. The river doesn't begin to get that far now before it swings east to the Little Owyhee. . . . That's the Black Rock Desert, to the west. You can see the railroad striking across it. There's nothing in that direction but wasteland for forty miles."

The hour they spent on the butte was a memorable one for Tinsley. To a degree that amazed him, Ria detached herself from the cares and concerns that had occupied her mind of late. She had a natural gaiety, and her warm, low laughter ran through him like music. Her thoughts were close to the surface. Watching her sensitive face, he could see them come and go. For himself, he knew the blessed relief of being able to relax for the first time since he had come to the valley.

The sun was moving swiftly toward the horizon now. In a hushed silence, they watched the great golden orb disappear. Long after, they sat there enthralled by the equally majestic splendor of the ever-changing afterglow. Night was ready to ring down its soft curtain by the time they reached the plain.

What the morrow was to bring, Clark didn't know, but it was back in his thoughts and with a new significance. Knowing the temper of both sides, he didn't see how bloodshed could be avoided. He started to speak several times, only to hold back, unwilling to bring the brief reprieve from reality to an end. Finally, he could hold in no longer.

"Ria—I suppose you know just about where the surveyors are going to come through Downs' line."

"Within a few yards," she replied.

"They have the legal right to take down a section of the fence. Are you going to try to stop them?"

"No. We know what their rights are and we think we know ours."

"Knowing your rights doesn't mean that the other side will respect them. You'll go up to Downs' ranch first thing in the morning, no doubt. I hope you won't be foolish enough to be anywhere near his fence."

"But I shall, Clark. I expect to be there all day."

"Oh, no, Ria," he protested vigorously. "Why take a chance? I know from what Berdan and Logan said to

me that they were sending men up there who'd use their guns if they had to. There's around a dozen of them, I understand. There'll be more by tomorrow. It wouldn't surprise me if Logan sent up his whole crew. It'll be a miracle if shots aren't fired."

"Please," she pleaded. "You needn't worry; I'll be perfectly safe. Mr. Ruxton will be there—"

"Good heavens, Ria. Buck can't stop a whirlwind! He'd be the first one to tell you so!"

"He'll have his eyes open—observing everything that happens," she persisted. "That'll be enough. I'm sure Win Berdan will instruct his men not to start hostilities without due provocation. I promise you we don't intend to give them an excuse for attacking us; I know we can stop them short of that. And that's all I'm going to say about it."

They had cut into the road and were moving toward home, when they caught the swift running of a pony. It came nearer, and through the deep dusk of early evening they saw a rider bearing down on them. He swept by and then pulled up sharply, calling, "Is that you, Ria?"

"Yes, Les!" she answered, recognizing Dufors' voice.

Dufors turned back, saying, "We're all set for mornin', Ria! We'll have a bunch at Jerry's place by sunup, just in case Berdan tries any funny business. If you—" He checked himself abruptly. He had been peering through the darkness at Tinsley and recognized him only now. A smothered oath escaped him as he turned on Ria. "What's the meanin' of this?" he demanded, anger and suspicion running through his words. "Why are you out ridin' with him after dark? I thought it was one of our crowd. . . . My God, ain't there no one a man can trust?"

Tinsley threw his horse toward Dufors. "That'll be enough of that!" he rapped. "You've got no reason to fly off the handle. If Miss Eaton feels she is under any

obligation to explain to you why she happens to be in my company, I'm sure she can do so—or I'll be happy to do it for her."

"No, I'll speak for myself!" Ria insisted, her voice sharp with indignation. "I'm not under obligation to account to anyone. I can understand your surprise, Les, but how dare you say I'm not to be trusted? I know you're convinced that Mr. Tinsley is one of our arch enemies. I can't agree with you. He's never given the opposition any encouragement; you don't see any P Bench men among the guards Berdan and Logan recruited."

Dufors did not retreat an inch. "He had his reasons for that, I reckon—same as he has for givin' Ritchie a break."

"Les, how blind can you be?" Ria demanded, her low cry sharp and desperate. "Have you asked yourself why Ritchie tried to kill this man? I hadn't meant to say this but I will: Mr. Tinsley saw Ritchie, your own Marcel and the other boys who burned Sam Grinell's hay. He had only to say a word and everyone of them would have been in trouble—arrested and sent away. If he wanted to smash us, he wouldn't have remained silent. . . . How do you explain it, Les?"

"I dunno," Dufors grunted, adamant in his wrath. "I reckon there's most likely a string on it. This is the first I heard that Marcel had a hand in that fire. I ain't takin' this man's word for it."

"You don't have to," Ria told him. "Come to the house and speak to Ritchie yourself. He's confessed the whole thing. I'm not going to prolong this senseless argument, Les. You can think what you please and you'll have to permit me to do the same; I regard Mr. Tinsley as our friend."

"That I can't believe!" Dufors whipped out recklessly. "You'll have some explainin' to do, Ria, if that's your

only excuse for takin' up with him! If he saw things our way, he'd come out in the open and line up with us like Teton did!"

In the darkness, Clark's face was hard and rocky. He knew Dufors had forced his hand; that the only way he could save the situation for Ria was to declare himself. Forcing Dufors to swallow his ugly words would not be enough to spare her further embarrassment.

"Come, Clark," she said. "I can't stand any more of this!"

"Wait," he told her. "I'm going to set this man straight about this." Tall and square in the saddle, he leaned toward Dufors. With their faces within a foot of each other, he said, "If you hadn't gone off half-cocked, you wouldn't have found it necessary to accuse anyone of double dealing. It wasn't by accident that Miss Eaton met me. I knew Berdan's side of the story; I wanted to hear her side. My father was nobody's fool, but I've felt from the first that his confidence in Berdan and Nip Logan was misplaced. The deeper I went into the proposition, the less I liked it; this so-called power and water company has me up a tree—obligated to put money into it on the one hand, while they walk off with my water rights on the other. With what tomorrow's bringing up, I wanted to know where I stood, Dufors. Thanks to Miss Eaton, I do. I'll be at Downs' place early in the morning with most of my crew, and I'll be in this fight until we win it."

Ria was no less surprised than Dufors. She realized, however, that Clark's viewpoint could not have changed so drastically in the last few minutes; that his declaration was nothing more than a desperate attempt to save face for her. She knew he would go through with it, no matter what it cost him. That knowledge was precious to her, but she felt she couldn't permit him to enter the fight on such terms. She wanted to protest at once.

"No, Clark—" she began and got no further, realizing that whatever she said would not only make Tinsley ridiculous and suspect in Dufors' eyes but forever prevent his coming in with them.

Dufors had nothing to dull the sharp edge of his surprise. "That throws me!" he gulped. "You mean it, Tinsley?"

"I do," Clark answered harshly.

Dufors thought it over for a long time before he said, "Looks like I put my foot in it. If you'll go all out with us, it'll make a difference. A big difference!" He was angry then, glowering first at Ria and then at Tinsley. "Why did you have to let me go on like that—makin' a damn fool of myself? Why didn't you tell me right off what was behind your bein' together?"

"Your own fault," Tinsley answered him. "I'd like you better, Dufors, if you used your head a little. If we're going to pull together, you want to look before you leap. You're the first to know about this. Suppose you ride up to Teton's tonight and tell him. When I show up at the fence in the morning, I don't want there to be any question about it."

"I'll go up as soon as I grab a bite to eat." Dufors faced Ria and muttered an embarrassed apology. He was suddenly in a hurry to be gone. He swung his horse and raked it with the spurs. The sound of its running moved away and the night was still again.

Ria sat there. Tinsley came close to her.

"Clark—I can't let you do this," she said, her voice low and tense with emotion. "I know you spoke only to spare me. I'm not going to see you forced into a position you don't honestly believe you can take."

"I can't back away from it now, Ria. The way things have been shaping up, it would have got to this sooner or later anyhow. I thought I as much as said so this afternoon."

He was near enough to catch the sad, regretful smile that touched her sensitive face briefly. "It could have meant so much to me if it had come any way but this. Les is all right in many ways; I don't hold his wild talk against him. I guess it was hard for him to understand why we should be together. . . . You were so angry."

"I took all I could," Tinsley admitted. He reached out and placed his hand on hers. "Don't let it upset you, Ria. When I told you my support would very likely embarrass you, I didn't have anything like this in mind; but there'll be other incidents. We'll have to face the questions and suspicions and wear them down."

"That doesn't frighten me," she said resolutely. "It won't take long to convince the doubters that you are really with us."

"I don't know about that," he muttered dubiously. "I don't propose to step out on the end of the limb just to show them where I stand. My idea of how this fight should be conducted is the same as yours. It'll be held against me by some; you know what you've been up against. You don't have to look any further than Ritchie. When you try to appeal to men's reason rather than passions, you're giving yourself a tough row to hoe. . . . Am I entitled to know what you're going to do tomorrow?"

"Certainly, and you can use your own judgment about how many of your crew you bring with you."

The resistance she planned came as a complete surprise to Tinsley. He nodded approvingly when she finished. "That's a novel idea," he said. "It may work—for a time."

"We'll see to it that they don't wear us down," she returned, undaunted by what she felt was his lukewarm enthusiasm. "I've arranged to have people take turns being there. It'll stop Berdan, and I don't believe even

such a ruthless old pirate as Nip Logan will dare to use violence on women and children."

"He'll be lucky if he escapes a stroke." Tinsley smiled to himself as he contemplated Logan's wrath and consternation. "Whether it's guns or some legal maneuver, we can depend on them to do something. I'll be at Downs' fence early. I'll bring only a man or two with me."

They had begun to move along the road toward the house. "Won't you come in and talk to Father?" Ria asked.

"No, I'll leave it to you to tell him everything. I'll have some explaining to do at P Bench."

It was after nine when he trotted into the yard. A light still burned in the dining room. Henry Martin stepped out of the office and scrutinized him closely.

"You're late getting in. Everything all right?"

"Everything but supper," Clark replied. "I hope Smoky has kept something on the stove for me."

Henry nodded and started for the kitchen, A light showed there presently. A few minutes later, Tinsley sat down to his late supper, with his foreman seated across the table. Smoky limped in with a pot of fresh coffee and hovered about them, his ears wide open. Things were being said tonight that he had never expected to hear uttered under this roof.

"I'm surprised, and maybe I shouldn't be," said Martin, sober and wooden-faced, when Tinsley finished. "I saw the direction the wind was blowing. The morning Berdan and Nip were here and you turned them down, I figured it would get to this sooner or later. I didn't expect it to come so soon. But you're like your father in that respect; when your mind is made up, you act."

"I've given Logan and Berdan the benefit of every doubt for three weeks and more," Tinsley told him. "The decision I made this evening wasn't taken on the

spur of the moment; there was a lot of cold thinking behind it. You say yourself that there's things about this water scheme that don't smell right."

Henry Martin nodded solemnly. "I didn't like the way they got the votes to put the deal over. And I keep asking myself what there is in this for Win Berdan that he's got so busy about it. When your father was alive, I never questioned his judgment and I don't intend to do it now. He talked this idea over with me and all he saw in it was a chance to get more water for P Bench; I don't recall him ever saying anything about making a profit out of the company. It was to be a real co-operative, with everyone in it having something to say about how it should be run. It wasn't until word came that he had passed away that Berdan and Logan took everything into their own hands. I'm sure if your father could speak to you, he'd tell you to get back your water rights if you can, and hang on to them."

A surprised smile played over Tinsley's mouth. This frank statement was not easy to reconcile with some of the views and advice his foreman had given him on his arrival at P Bench. "You're a cautious man, Henry. I've been trying to smoke you out for a long time. I wasn't sure how you'd feel about this, but now that we've got down to scratch, we seem to see eye to eye."

Martin nodded and said in his sober way, "I wanted you to make up your own mind. I figured it was my duty to point out some of the difficulties. I told you if you lined up with Teton and his crowd, they'd be suspicious of you. I'm sure they will."

"I know it," Tinsley acknowledged. "I've had a sample of it already. I don't intend to try to break it down; I'll ignore it and let it cure itself. No matter how things go for the next few days, it won't settle anything. Running Logan and Berdan into their holes will be a step in the right direction, but nobody is going to get his

water rights back until the State of Nevada revokes the charter and orders the Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association dissolved. That's going to take time."

"By grab, anythin's better than sittin' on the fence, pickin' up splinters in the seat of yore pants!" Smoky spoke up. "I shore wisht I was young enough to git in this ruckus. I'd shore make somebody's hair fly. I bin over every square foot of this country; ain't no mystery to me what old Nip and his boy Berdan are aimin' at."

Martin started to silence the old puncher. Tinsley said, "Go ahead, Smoky. What do you think they're after?"

"Hellsfire, there can't be no question about it! There's a couple hundred thousand acres of good desert land down the valley. It'll grow anythin' if yuh put water on it. It's Gov'ment land. Yuh can buy the best of it for a dollar and quarter an acre. Folks wonderin' what those two highbinders is goin' to do with all the water they're goin' to store up! That's what they're goin' to do—put it on that desert land!"

Martin looked at Tinsley. "That could be the joker, Clark. The land falls away for miles. It would take gravity water, no question about it."

Tinsley put down his knife and fork and murmured, "As simple as that! I had a bird's-eye view of it this afternoon from Steamboat Butte. It never occurred to me that it might figure in this scheming."

"If you're a stockman, you size up country from that angle," Martin observed. "I reckon that's why nobody's given it a thought. No grass on those plains. If that end of the valley is ever developed, it won't be for stock-raising."

"No, but with water, it can be put to wheat and be worth ten times the value of grazing land." Tinsley pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "When I was talking to Teton, he wanted to know what the company

was going to do with all its water. He asked me if Berdan and Logan intended to make farming country out of the valley. He was only talking but maybe he wasn't so wide of the mark at that. . . . Come on, Henry; walk down the yard with me; I want to talk to the men for a minute. If they're going to be thrown into the fight, they're entitled to know where I stand. If they don't like it, they can ask for their time."

"They'll like it," Henry Martin declared grimly. "The trouble will be to hold 'em down."

"I don't expect them to take the edge of the sidewalk for Double Diamond or any other outfit."

"By grab, sounds like a man could hold his head up around here again!" old Smoky cackled.

Tinsley swung around on him at the door. "I believe you turned up an ace tonight. I'll speak to Carter about it tomorrow. You keep your mouth shut till he sees what he can find in the U. S. Land Office. If Berdan and Logan have been buying anything, the records will show it."

"Not always," Martin asserted. "The papers may have come through, but a local agent can hold them back for two or three months if he's a mind to. You may have to go further than Hays City to get the facts."

"I'll go all the way to Washington if I have to," was Tinsley's pointed answer.

8

TINSLEY trotted into Hays City the next morning, with Red Lucas and Purdy Roberts riding at his side. It was not yet eight o'clock, but late enough for the town to have been busy. The stores were deserted, however, and the air of tension of the preceding day or two had multiplied tenfold. Usually at this hour, saddle stock and rigs of one sort or another were tethered at the hitch racks that lined both sides of the main street. They were not there this morning. There was a movement of people from the residential sections of town and almost without exception it was toward the north. Jerry Downs' small Box D ranch lay in that direction, a scant two miles above Hays City.

When Tinsley and his men reached the north road, they found it lined with buckboards, buggies, ranch wagons and people on foot and horseback.

"Looks like a parade," Red remarked. "Men, wimmen and kids, all goin' up to see the fun."

The glances directed at them as they passed ranged from coolness to frank hostility. As much to avoid an unpleasant incident as to gain time, Tinsley said, "Suppose we take to the brush; we can save half an hour."

When they reached the Box D house they found a small group of men gathered there, Frank Eaton, Ria's father, among them. He stepped forward and spoke to Clark. His manner was stiff and reserved but not unfriendly.

"What Ria told me last night came as something of

a surprise," he said. "It's going to take me a little time to get used to it. I know you can help us."

Tinsley accepted it with a nod. "I'll go all out to do it. I know that's the only way I can help myself. . . . I suppose we just follow the procession."

"Yes, you'll see the crowd when you get over that little rise. Ria is out there. She's expecting you."

From the rise, they saw a crowd of several hundred people gathered inside of Downs' north line. Teams were standing about in hopeless confusion. Women were visiting back and forth and a small army of children were romping about the vehicles. It had all the appearance of a range country church picnic that hadn't settled down to the day's activities.

Ria detached herself from the crowd and rode up to them. She had Teton Williams with her. The latter jerked an impersonal nod at Tinsley and the P Bench men.

"I'm glad you're here, Clark," she said. "What do you think of the size of this crowd?"

Beneath her outward calm he could see that she was nervous and excited. He smiled at her and said, "It's quite a turn-out. I don't see how a surveyor can run a line through here this morning. Have they moved up to the fence yet?"

"They're in sight," Teton answered for her. "Bill Starr is with 'em. He rode up to the fence a few minutes ago and had a look over here. He trotted back in a hurry." The little man studied Tinsley carefully. "Ria has convinced me that you mean business. How far are you prepared to go, Tinsley?"

"As far as my money and whatever strength and influence I possess will take me."

"I reckon you'll be called on for some of all three." Teton pulled his battered Stetson a little lower over his

squinting eyes. "You spoke to me of compromise. I hope you've got that nonsense out of your head."

"Not exactly," said Clark. "If the water company will return our water rights, I'll be willing to let them go ahead and build their dam and put in a canal from here to the South Pole."

Old Teton let out a rusty, rasping laugh. He hadn't found much to amuse him of late. "By grab, I'll settle on them terms myself!" His levity ran out of him quickly and in quite another tone he said, "That's jest a wild dream, Tinsley. You know that pair of pirates won't let go of our water rights till they're licked to a finish."

"I'm afraid you're right," the tall man agreed. "But that's my price, and I won't take less."

Buck Ruxton walked up to them and spoke to Tinsley. "You got here, I see. I hear you've joined up with these folks."

Tinsley thought the sheriff looked puzzled. With a smile, he said, "You shouldn't find that hard to understand, Buck. You advised me not to take anything for granted. I've been on the Sweetwater long enough to have had a look around and get my eyes open."

"My personal opinions are my own; officially, I'll have to regard what you do as your business and hold you accountable," Ruxton responded sharply and with some irritation. "I'll tell you what I've told the others; this is a peaceful assembly only as long as it remains peaceful."

With that, he moved away, and Tinsley said, "Buck's touchy this morning."

"He's in a difficult position," Ria spoke up. "He wants to be fair. While there's time, Clark, let me make you acquainted with some men you should know."

She introduced him to Carson Platt, Dan Honeywell and half a dozen others. They were aloof and skeptical. Honeywell expressed their attitude when he said, "This

is the first time P Bench has shown any signs of being ready to go to bat for small fry like us. Naturally, we're asking ourselves how come."

Tinsley said, "You're laboring under a misapprehension, gentlemen. It's not a case of my going to bat for you; we have a mutual interest in smashing this grab for power and water. It's on that basis—and no other—that I'm making my stand with you."

It was frankness of a sort they could understand. Ria congratulated him on his directness, the moment they were alone.

"You handled yourself very well," she told him. "Speaking your mind and not trying to curry favor will break down suspicion and prejudice in short order."

She excused herself and he rejoined Red and Purdy. The crowd had grown in the half-hour they had been there.

"And still they come," Purdy muttered, looking back toward the house. "I swear Carse Platt has got every Mormon in town out here this mornin'."

"I see plenty that ain't Mormons," Red countered. "There's all kinds, even Piutes and a Chinaman. Ria certainly rounded up a bunch of folks. I bet there's more fried chicken in them lunch baskets than ever got congregated in one place since this county was laid out."

As the sun got higher, the women began moving into the shade of the wagons. The children continued to race back and forth, shouting at the top of their lungs and thoroughly enjoying themselves. The men gathered in groups and looked grave. To the north, the surveying party and its mounted guards moved steadily nearer.

"Boss, just what are we expected to do when them fellas come through the fence?" Red inquired.

"Move back and forth and get in their way as much as possible. The women and children have been told to sit down in a big circle and not move an inch."

Red pushed back his hat and scratched his head. "That'll be all right as far as it goes, but it won't go far —not with a hair-trigger gent like Bill Starr. You heard Teton say Bill is up there with them."

"I expected he would be," Tinsley muttered. "Got about twenty men with him, too. Mostly Double Diamond, no doubt. It won't be necessary for us to say anything; Teton has been chosen to do our talking. We better move toward the fence a bit; they're getting close."

A sullen silence gripped the crowd as the surveyors neared the line; mothers called their children in and stilled their clamor.

According to the announced specifications, this main canal was to be twenty feet wide. To speed the work, Joel Townley, the chief engineer, was running parallel lines with two transits. As soon as opposite stakes were driven, they were double checked with a chain. The work went on smoothly, the two rodmen moving out ahead of the transits at fairly regular intervals. Bill Starr and his guards kept to the rear, advancing a few yards at a time after the stakes were in the ground. Win Berdan observed operations from his buggy, moving along as the work progressed and conferring frequently with Townley. On his orders, there was a definite effort by all hands to ignore the assembled crowd across the fence.

"That's a cheap two-bit bluff, pretendin' they don't know we're around!" Red grunted. "Some of those boys back there with Bill don't look too happy. Reckon they ain't here because they want to be."

"You recognize them?" Tinsley asked.

"Yeah! Mostly Double Diamond. You can be dead certain they've spotted us, too."

A few minutes later, the rodman on the right approached to within a few feet of the line and planted

his red and white pole. After a shouted exchange of unintelligible instructions and much wigwagging from the man at the transit, the pole was placed where it belonged. A stake was driven immediately. The rodman on the left repeated the performance. That brought things to a temporary halt. They were smack up against the fence. Before they could proceed, four strands of barbed wire had to be cut, and just inside that wire, back only far enough so that they could maneuver their horses freely, a score of determined-looking men faced them.

Frank Eaton and Jerry Downs pushed in between Tinsley and Teton. They had a youngster with them who resembled Downs so closely that there could be no question but what he was Bud Downs, Jerry's son. The boy gave Tinsley a long glance that held an obscure interest that Red and Purdy caught but failed to understand. Clark read it easily enough; he knew Bud had been talking to Ritchie.

Berdan conferred with his engineer again and then got down from his buggy and marched up to the fence. He was not at all certain about what he was walking into, but his courage was equal to the occasion and he put on a bold front. Starr had informed him that Tinsley was here with two of his men. A glance confirmed the fact and it did not add to Berdan's composure. Ignoring the owner of P Bench, he looked for Ruxton. With an arrogant gesture that said he had enough of this nonsense, he ordered the sheriff to step up.

"The company doesn't want any trouble here, Buck," he said, loud enough for all to hear. "You know we've been granted the authority to take down a section of fence wherever necessary so we can run our lines through."

Ruxton nodded with a notable absence of excitement.

"That's my understandin'. Nobody's stoppin' you from takin' it down."

Such ready compliance was unexpected by Berdan and he was at once suspicious. He gave Buck an icy stare. "I don't look for any favors from you, Ruxton, but I'm going to call on you to do your duty."

"You're free to do that any time," said Buck. "You've got your rights and so have these folks. I'll do my best to see that those rights are respected."

Berdan realized that Ruxton was serving notice on him that he would resist any attempt to run roughshod over the assembled ranchers and their friends. For the moment, however, he pretended to be satisfied with the sheriff's stand. He walked back to where Townley and Bill Starr waited.

"What's Buck got to say?" Starr asked.

"They're not going to object to our cutting the wire. Moving that mob out of the way is going to be another matter." The morning was not particularly warm, but Berdan produced a handkerchief and mopped his face. "They pulled a smart move on us, getting all those people out here. Tinsley's over there with them, as big as life. Knowing he's thrown in with them will stiffen their backbone. It's got Ruxton up on his ear. We won't get any help from him."

"You didn't expect any, did you?" Starr growled. "When we get the fence down, this won't be too hard a nut to crack. We'll give 'em a chance to get out of the way; if they won't move, we'll push through 'em."

"No," Berdan objected flatly. "I'm warning you again, Bill, there doesn't want to be any rough stuff unless they start it. There's enough feeling against the company as it is; we can't afford to have any more of it whipped up. We'll try to go through this morning. If we can't, we'll wait them out and lose a day. I don't believe they hope to do anything more than delay us. It

isn't likely there'll be a crowd like this out here tomorrow. If there is, I'll get a restraining order from the court and see that Ruxton serves it on Downs. It'll put the law on our side and discourage that Eaton girl from trying the same tactics further down the valley."

Townley nodded soberly. "That may do it. Something will have to be done for sure before I order my men to proceed with the work. All I contracted to do, Mr. Berdan, was the surveying; I don't propose to become a third party to this dispute."

"No, of course not!" Berdan agreed emphatically. "I wouldn't think of asking you to set foot on Downs' range until it's perfectly safe for you to go across. I know if you and your boys were here alone this morning, you'd take down a section of that fence and roll it back without thinking twice about it. Am I right?"

"I suppose you are," the engineer conceded. "We'd have the legal right to do it."

"That's my point exactly. Bill and the other men are not actually in the employ of the company. If they cut the wire, it'll be like waving a red flag in the face of a bull, as far as that crowd over there is concerned. I'm going to ask you to do it, Townley—so any unpleasantness can be avoided. As soon as you have it down, you can drop back and I'll take charge."

Townley considered his answer for a moment or two and then reluctantly said yes. Across the way, Clark and the others saw the two engineers approach the fence, armed with nippers and a staple puller. With an expertness born of long experience, they cut the wire and rolled it back. Jerry Downs rocked in his saddle as he fought to contain his wrath. A low, angry growl swelled up from the rest of the crowd. With the fence cutting completed, Townley and the other engineer fell back at once. The tension eased momentarily. Ria swung out in front and rode down the line, calm and confident.

She spoke to Downs. "Thanks for seeing this my way, Jerry. We've taken a trick by not trying to stop them."

She edged in beside Clark. "I'm glad that's over," she whispered. "It could have been a bad moment."

"Is it necessary for you to be up here in front?" Tinsley's tone carried the full measure of his annoyance and anxiety for her. "This thing can get out of hand any moment."

"There's less chance of that happening if I'm up here," she said in her positive, unassailable way. "Here comes Berdan. He'll ask Mr. Ruxton to move us out of the way. We'll see how that goes."

Tinsley could not deny her an admiring smile. "You're not afraid?"

"Not as much as I was an hour ago. There'll be some angry talk, but I don't believe it will go beyond that this morning—unless we lose our heads. Mr. Berdan has had time to think things over. If he was prepared to force the issue, he would have sent Bill Starr up to cut that fence."

As predicted, Berdan addressed himself to the sheriff. "I'll have to ask you to get these people and their rigs aside, so we can go on, Ruxton."

"I'll be glad to ask them," Buck returned casually. "I don't know whether they'll oblige or not."

"Hunh!" Berdan snorted. "It's up to you to get them out of the way! You know a surveyor can't run a line through that tangle of wagons and what not!"

"I don't see how it could be done," Buck agreed. "On the other hand, this is Jerry's range. These folks are here on his invitation, enjoyin' a picnic. I haven't any cause to interfere with them; they ain't disturbin' the peace so far as I can see."

"Picnic!" Win's face was purple. "Don't hand that to me! You know they're here for just one purpose—to de-

lay us! Every last man is armed. This is no peaceful assembly. Men don't go to a picnic toting guns."

"Wal, I don't know about that," Buck demurred. "I been to some that they did." He turned to Teton Williams. "How about it, Teton? You folks inclined to move aside?"

"No, this spot suits us fine, Buck. The wimmen folks is gittin' lunch spread out. Friend Berdan will have to wait to do his surveyin' when we git finished."

"How long will that be?" Berdan demanded hotly.

"I can't rightly say." Teton rubbed a horny hand across his mouth. "This picnic may run on for days—if the food keeps coming, and I reckon it will."

"There you are, Ruxton!" Win cried. "What more proof do you want? He's as good as admitted that this is a trick to stop us from proceeding with our legitimate business." He stomped back and forth for a moment. "Nobody's fooling anyone, Ruxton! Suppose we get down to cases. We can run our lines through in thirty minutes, put this fence up behind us and be off Downs' range before nightfall. Let them say yes or no to that."

"The answer is no," Teton said promptly. "We ain't obliged to accommodate ourselves to yore wishes."

Tinsley saw Ria catch Teton's eye and silently implore him to say no more.

The fiery little man was not to be stopped, however. "We know you got the right to come through, but not whenever you dang please!" he ran on. "This is still private property!"

It was enough to give Berdan his cue. "I'll show you whether it's private property or not!" he whipped back. "The company has the authority to condemn a twenty-five foot right of way down this valley—free from hindrance! Just because Ruxton's side-stepping his duty, don't let that fool you; you people can't buck the State of Nevada! If you've still got the way blocked tomorrow

morning, we'll see what the courts have to say about it!"

The crowd hooted and jeered as he stalked away. On reaching his buggy, he ordered the surveying party and the guards to fall back. They withdrew for a quarter of a mile. A few minutes later, Berdan left for town.

Teton and the others, believing they had come off victorious, expressed themselves accordingly. "We sent him packin'!" Les Dufors declared gleefully. "Let him go to court! We'll call that bluff, too!"

He and a dozen others congratulated Ria on their success. Tinsley was not one of them. "I know I don't deserve all the credit everyone is giving me," she said as soon as they found themselves alone. "I would have been satisfied with a word of praise from you. But you haven't anything to say. . . . What is it, Clark? Certainly you can't deny that it went our way."

"It did. But it was only a minor skirmish, Ria. I can't get excited about it like your father, Teton, Dufors—Downs."

Her chin came up an inch or two and with the long curve gone from her lips, she said, "I'm sorry you feel that way."

"Please don't misunderstand me," he pleaded. "I appreciate all you've done. We can hold them back for a day or two—maybe longer. But Berdan said something that makes me wonder if it won't be an empty victory. I've never read the water company's charter. I might not understand it if I did; I'm no lawyer. But if they have the authority to condemn a right of way through here, then the courts will have to support Berdan and order the sheriff to eject us and remove any obstacle we place in the way. . . . Have you had a legal opinion on it, Ria?"

"Why, no!" she exclaimed, her pique forgotten. "It never occurred to me that there could be any doubt about our right to be here. The only question in my mind was whether I could rely on the solemn promises

given me that there wouldn't be any violence on our part."

"Well, we better find out where we stand," said Tinsley. "I'm going to ride into town and see Carter. I'll leave Red and Purdy here with you. If trouble should blow up unexpectedly, they'll get you out of it. . . . Understand?"

Ria gazed at him steadily for a long moment, her dark eyes warm with understanding. "You're very thoughtful, Clark," she murmured. "But these people are here at my request; I think you're well enough acquainted with me to know I wouldn't leave them in an emergency."

Tinsley nodded, and when he spoke his voice had a low gruffness. "That's what I'm afraid of."

His back stiff and uncompromising, he trotted away. Ria smiled as she saw him stop to exchange a word with his men. He was gone then, a tall, square shape in the saddle. "They know their own minds, these Tinsleys," she whispered to herself, and added with a little sigh, "Pray God, this one didn't leave someone behind him in Idaho."

9

TINSLEY found business at a standstill in Hays City. He put his horse into the rack opposite the Sweetwater House. Before he had time to swing down from the saddle, two business men, with whom he had become acquainted, stepped across the sidewalk to inquire what the situation was at Box D. From the nature of their questions, he realized that they were well informed regarding the position he had taken. He was mildly surprised until they explained that they had got their information from Berdan, who had driven in within the past ten minutes.

The news had not gotten upstairs to Britt Carter, however, and Tinsley had first to acquaint him with the step he had taken.

"Well, that *is* news!" the elderly lawyer exclaimed. He didn't conceal the fact that he was pleased. "Frankly, I think it was a wise decision, Clark. There's no doubt in my mind but what there's something rotten in Denmark, as the saying has it, about this water scheme. When I found that Grinell's mortgage had been cancelled, it was evidence enough for me. He didn't find the money under a tree, certainly. It was a bribe, but I don't know how we can get evidence to prove it. But tell me what happened this morning."

He interrupted Tinsley's detailed account with a pertinent question several times. At the end, he sat there shaking his head disapprovingly.

"You evidently think we're over our heads," Tinsley said, anticipating the lawyer's verdict.

"Under law, you people haven't a leg to stand on. A right of way having been granted, a property owner is under compulsion to give the grantee free access to it at all times. This alleged picnic is a transparent subterfuge. But that's beside the point. Jerry would be just as much at fault if it were a bonafide social gathering. There are many things in law that can be argued, but not this; he's denying the company its right to cross his range just as he'd be doing if he had put a barn in the way. At its pleasure, the company could go around the barn or have the court order it torn down."

Clark thought it over for a moment. "I was afraid of this, Britt. What do you think Berdan will do?"

"He may try to wait you out—but not for long. I've always found Oliver Littleton an honorable and fair-minded judge, but in this dispute, he may lean slightly toward the water company. I think Berdan knows he can count on him—not that any favoritism will be required in this present instance. He'll undoubtedly have Tom Lamb petition the court to evict you people from the right of way and get an order enjoining Jerry to desist from any further attempt to block the work. Littleton will have to grant it. He can't do otherwise."

"That'll put it up to Ruxton." There was stubbornness in Tinsley's tone and along the straight line of his mouth. "He may find it quite a job."

Carter had been sitting with his hands clasped across his stomach. He unlaced his fingers and got up abruptly, the blue veins in his thin, finely sculptured face more pronounced than usual. "Don't try it, Clark. You can't buck the law and win. I'm acquainted with the men you're lined up with. I could go down the list, beginning with Teton Williams and the Dufors, and name a dozen or more who let their violent tempers run away

with what little judgment they possess. I don't expect any sane, intelligent reasoning from them, but I do from you. It's a criminal offense to defy a court order; you'll be found in contempt, fined and very likely imprisoned. . . . This may not be what you wanted to hear from me, but it's good advice—the best I can give you."

"I know it, Britt," Tinsley acknowledged. "But what I think doesn't cut any ice with the others. I can talk to Ria and she'll listen; I haven't anything to say when it comes to the rest of them. They're suspicious of me—and with some reason, I suppose."

"Bide your time and they'll turn to you," said Carter. "They'll have to. Maria is a remarkable young woman, but she can't carry on this fight without help. If you think it's any advantage to you to delay Berdan a few days, stay where you are until he slaps a paper on Downs. You can stall along for a day or so, even then; but you'll have to get out of the way, Clark. Don't try to resist; you'll lose if you do."

With a touch of humor Tinsley said, "There may not be any advantage in holding them back but there'll be some satisfaction in doing it." He turned sober suddenly. "Dan Honeywell's ranch adjoins Box D. There'll be some who'll be all set to do this all over again when the surveyors get down that far if we get away with it this time. Repeat it often enough and somebody is bound to stub his toe."

"I don't believe you need worry about it happening a second time. Lamb's a shrewd lawyer; he'll be sure to protect the company against a repetition of this incident." The white-haired attorney adjusted his glasses and pulled down a book from the shelves. "This matter came up some years ago in a railroad right of way case." He thumbed through the volume for several minutes and then replaced it on the shelf. "I thought I could put

my finger on it but I don't seem able to. It doesn't matter; I'm sure Lamb is familiar with it."

Carter resumed his chair and made a note on his pad. "I'll grant you that it was a spectacular move, putting several hundred people in Townley's way. Still I can't help feeling that such tactics are a waste of time. What difference can it make if you succeed in delaying the company a month or two? You not only invite violence but you are apt to lose sight of the fact that to win you've got to prove that the Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association used coercion, bribery and/or intimidation to secure the necessary majority in the voting, or that its real purpose is fraudulent. There's your real issue, Clark; anything else is beside the point."

"There can't be any question about that," Tinsley declared. "As I told you when I was in day before yesterday, I thoroughly agree with you. Something was said at the ranch last evening that may shed some light on why the company is putting in a twenty-foot main ditch, when one half that size would carry enough water to supply all known needs. Old Smoky was popping off. Henry and I believe he may have hit the nail on the head."

Tinsley acquainted him with what had been said at the table. Carter was visibly impressed. "That's very interesting!" he declared. "Very interesting! It would be the perfect answer to this riddle." He swung around in his swivel chair and faced the window, communing with himself for a moment. "It may be only a coincidence, but Charlie MacDonough, the local land agent, closed up the office a week ago and left for California on a month's vacation."

"Will you have to wait till he returns to dig into the matter?" Tinsley inquired.

"No, I can get all the information from Washington. In fact, I prefer to get it that way." Carter turned to

Tinsley. "I wouldn't say anything about this for the present. If Berdan and Logan have been buying any of that land, you can be sure they've done it through a dummy. With MacDonough's help, they could cover up their tracks for a time at this end, so it's just as well he's away." He leaned back, shaking his head, fascinated by the magnitude of such a scheme. "If this is it, our friends are playing for big stakes, Clark. If they can put water on that land, they can sell it for forty to sixty dollars an acre and make themselves a couple million dollars." He snapped out of his momentary day dreaming to say, "I'll get a letter off to Washington today."

"I want you to use every means you can to run this down, even to going to Washington personally," Tinsley told him. "I don't want you to spare any expense, Britt. I think we can take it for granted if they've bought fifty to a hundred thousand acres of wasteland that they've used the company's money to do it. That means my money, and Stock's and all the rest of us who are stuck with the bonds."

"I can believe it," said Carter. "Expose them, and they'll be finished. Get them on the run and the truth will come out about the means they used to rig the voting. . . . What could have been the making of this country will have come to nothing," he added regretfully.

"No, Britt, there's no reason why that should be the end of it." The old lawyer regarded his visitor closely, finding him unconsciously sober even for one who didn't smile too often. "We can make a fresh start and keep the proposition honest. We can tap the river; we don't have to divert it. If we find we have water enough to turn some of it on that desert land, it would be a fine thing to develop it." Clark's mood changed abruptly. "That's looking pretty far ahead; today's got its own problems."

He got to his feet and made his gun-belt more com-

fortable on his hips. "I better be getting out of here," he said. "I told Ria I'd be back as soon as I could."

Carter walked to the door with him. "I wish you had brought her in. I advise you to tell her exactly what I've told you. And be sure she understands, Clark. If Teton and the rest of them won't listen to you, they may listen to her."

When Tinsley got back to the fence he found everything peaceful. Tablecloths had been spread on the ground. Young and old sat around them, finishing lunch and visiting back and forth. It gave the scene a holiday air. To the north of the fence the engineers and their guards had made a temporary camp. Inquiry revealed that they had made no attempt to cross the line.

Red hailed Tinsley as the latter passed a few yards away, leading his horse and looking for Ria. Purdy and he were seated with Carson Platt and his family. They had obviously made themselves perfectly at home.

"Well, you boys seem to have been well taken care of," Clark observed.

"Yes, sir!" Red assured him. "Mrs. Platt musta had a four-legged chicken in the basket." He waved a drumstick at Tinsley. "This is the fourth one I've polished off."

"I had two chickens, Red Lucas, and you very well know I did!" Mrs. Platt declared in mock reproof. She looked at Clark. "Don't you feed your crew, Mr. Tinsley? I swear this skinny one," she ran on, indicating Purdy Roberts with a motion of her head, "is the hungriest man I ever saw. Even my baked beans won't fill him up, it seems." She was a jolly soul and she laughed heartily at her own banter.

"You ain't got that quite straight, ma'am," Purdy protested, with a wide grin. "I got an ordinary run of the mill appetite as a rule; it's just that you're the cookin'est woman I ever ate after."

Red informed Tinsley that Ria and her father had gone back to the Box D house. "Frank had one of them dizzy spells that's been botherin' him," he explained. "She thought she better git him out of the sun."

Clark found the Eatons having their lunch on the porch. Ria invited him to share their basket with them. He expressed his concern for her father.

"It's nothing serious," Frank Eaton told him. "I can't stand too much excitement on account of my high blood pressure. It doesn't bother me if I take things easy."

"You've eaten a good lunch," said Ria. "You must be feeling better." She was anxious to ask Tinsley what he had learned in town but she held back on her father's account, wanting to spare him the further excitement of what might be discouraging news. The matter was taken out of her hands a moment later. Teton and Jerry Downs came out on the porch, and on seeing Tinsley, the former said at once, "Ria told me you'd gone in to see Carter. What did he have to say?"

"Can't we discuss it later?" Ria interjected lightly. "Mr. Tinsley hasn't had a mouthful of lunch." She glanced at Clark, appealing to him to come to her rescue.

He realized why she did not want the matter discussed in her father's presence. He wanted to do as she wished, but he knew this was no time for evasion or delay if what he had to say was to carry any weight. Tight of lip, he said, "Carter wasn't at all encouraging. He calls the surprise we handed Berdan spectacular, but to use his own words, under law, we haven't a leg to stand on. According to him the best we can hope to accomplish is to hold up operations for several days. When Berdan sees that we mean to stick it out, he'll have his lawyer get a court order restraining you, Jerry, from blocking the indicated right of way. You'll have to put us off or find yourself in contempt."

"Hunh!" Teton snorted belligerently. "That's just

Britt Carter's opinion and it don't cut no ice with me! Berdan kin git all the court orders he pleases! They won't git him nowheres!"

"We better hear the rest of this," Ria said anxiously. "Mr. Carter is an able lawyer."

"There's none better," Frank Eaton declared. "I've always regretted that he begged off when we asked him to represent us. If he's changed his mind about getting into this fight, we better come to terms with him."

"We done all right so far and saved ourselves some money," Teton growled. "I've had some court orders slapped on me in my time, some by Oliver Littleton. They're mostly bluff. They don't scare me. There's ways of beatin' that game. . . . What else did Carter tell you?"

They discussed Tinsley's interview at length. It had a disheartening effect on Ria and she did not try to dissemble the fact. "Don't let it get you down," Tinsley urged. "As I told Britt, we've got the satisfaction of knowing we're annoying Berdan."

Ria shook her head. "It doesn't seem worthwhile if all we can do is hold things up for a day or two. I thought we were well inside the law. How can a right of way be anything more than words on paper until it is staked out?"

"It can't—when a right of way has to be purchased," Tinsley explained. "It's a different matter when it comes as a grant, with the right to condemn. Railroads, racing for a town, have often put down track without bothering to make a survey. That was done later. As I get it, Berdan can place his right of way where he pleases, with no other responsibility than to pay for the land he takes and the buildings that may have to be pulled down."

"It isn't by accident that we're squatting where we are," Frank Eaton remarked. His attitude was far more

reasonable than Tinsley had expected. "We knew within a few feet where they were coming through."

"Shore we did!" Jerry burst out contentiously. "What of it? I don't get you, Frank. You sound as though you was advisin' us to call everythin' off."

"No, all I say is let's have a good look at our cards and be sure what we're holding."

"I ain't ag'in that," Teton took up, "but we're not backin' down neither. We're goin' to stand pat for the present. The next move's up to Win Berdan, and we'll let him make it."

Jerry and he left for the fence. Once they were away from the house, Teton let his annoyance boil over. "Such pussy-footin'!" he grunted. "I expected it from Tinsley, not from Frank. Don't pay no attention to it, Jerry. No question but Berdan will git Littleton to issue an order on you. It won't mean a damned thing till Buck serves it. If he can't locate you, what's he goin' to do?" Teton gave Downs a knowing wink. "You go up to my place tonight and make yoreself scarce till I git word to you."

That Teton did not intend to give any serious consideration to what Britt Carter had had to say was perfectly clear to Tinsley, and in a somewhat lesser degree Ria realized it. When her father had fallen asleep in the canvas hammock at the end of the porch, she and Tinsley mounted and rode out of the yard. There was a strained look on her young face. "He worries me," she said. "I didn't want him to come up today but he insisted."

Tinsley nodded. "I was sorry to let you down; I realized you didn't want me to say anything in front of him. The way Teton put it up to me, I felt I had to give him a straight answer."

"It turned out all right. I was afraid there'd be a blow-up. . . . What do you think we should do?"

"Stand fast until Jerry is ordered to move us out of the way. That will bring things to a head and divide us into two camps, I'm afraid. Some will insist on sticking it out at any price; others will feel as I do that we can't win by defying the law. With a few exceptions, everyone will be swayed by your stand."

Without glancing in his direction, she said, "Can there be any question in your mind about what my stand will be?"

"No, you see it the same way I do. Teton doesn't. It's a mean situation. I can't help you a bit; Teton won't take anything from me." Tinsley managed a smile. "I saw you back him down, my first morning in Hays City. Maybe you can do it again. . . . You'll be going home this evening, I presume."

"Yes," she answered. "I'll be back in the morning."

"Have you got men enough for tonight?"

"About forty have volunteered to stay. We'll have another crowd out tomorrow. Will you be here?"

"You can count on it. The boys and I will spend the night in town. We'll be out early. There's cattle on this range. Something will have to be done about the break in the fence. A ring of wagons will close it. I'd take care of it before sundown so Berdan's crowd will understand the purpose of it."

The rest of the afternoon passed without incident. By five o'clock, the Hays City contingent and most of the women and children began to leave. Tinsley stuck it out until dark. With Red and Purdy siding him, they trotted into Hays City twenty minutes later. Turning his horse over to them at the hotel, they went on to quarters of their own choosing. After being shown to his room and refreshing himself, he came down to a late supper. Ruxton was in the dining room. Tinsley walked over to him. "Mind if I sit down with you, Buck?" he inquired.

"No, help yourself," the sheriff told him. "My reputation can stand it if yours can. I'm just about finished; but sit down. Spendin' the night in town, eh?"

"Yeh. You evidently don't expect any trouble or you wouldn't be in either."

"I don't figure there'll be anythin' doin' tonight," Ruxton said. "Tomorrow may be a little rough. Berdan ain't tippin' his hand to me and I don't expect you to tip yours. But I got my own idea of what's comin' up."

Tinsley gave the waitress his order and settled back to regard the sheriff with a quizzical smile. "I don't suppose you're saying what that idea is, Buck."

The sheriff sipped his coffee thoughtfully. "I don't know why not. It's like when you give kids a bunch of firecrackers. No matter what you tell 'em, Tinsley, they're goin' to light 'em."

"You referring to legal fireworks?"

Over his cup, Ruxton said, "I wasn't, but you can include them." He had finished his supper. He got his meal ticket out of his purse to have it ready for the headwaitress to punch. Instead of pushing back his chair and getting to his feet, he sat there absent-mindedly twirling the ends of his mustache and scowling to himself as a man will when he weighs something in his mind. He turned his eyes on Tinsley. "It ain't up to me to tell you your business, but your father was my friend and what little I've seen of you pleases me. I don't want to see you finish back in the dust because you underplayed your hand."

Tinsley was puzzled. "I don't follow you."

"This mornin'—I couldn't help noticin' that you didn't have anythin' to say. And yet in a dollar and cents way, you were the biggest man out there. Downs, Frank Eaton, Dufors, Carse Platt—you could buy out any three or four of 'em and hardly miss the change. There ain't a man on your side but knows his chances of

winnin' this fight are better because you're with them. You don't have to take their backwash; you're P Bench —Owyhee Livestock—and that should draw a lot of water. And it ain't only money and power; you've got brains."

Tinsley shook his head and grinned. "You're badly mistaken, Buck, if you think that crowd has any idea of turning the reins over to me and following my leadership. Ria Eaton is the only one who has welcomed my support. If the others think I'm any help to them, they're mighty careful to conceal it. They suspect that I may have an angle in throwing in with them. If I didn't say anything this morning it was because I know they wouldn't take it from me. No, Buck; for the present, I'm a very unimportant character."

"That ain't the way the other side sees it," Ruxton growled. "They ain't talkin' about Ria Eaton and old Teton. You're the one they say they've got to stop. And I mean stop!" He hauled himself to his feet, gruff and annoyed. "You can make of that whatever you please."

10

When Tinsley reached the right of way next morning the situation appeared to be unchanged. The wagons that had been used to block the break in the fence had been removed. To the north, Townley's party could be seen where it had made camp the previous day. Ria had not yet arrived. Many others were on hand and reinforcements were riding in.

Some of the men who had stood the last watch, from two to four, were still asleep in the wagons or on the ground beneath them. As many as a dozen others were gathered in a knot about Teton. Tinsley walked that way. Conversation died suddenly and just as quickly began again, obviously on a changed subject. Ignoring the fact that he was being left out of something, Clark said, "There was a story going the rounds last evening that Sam Grinell had had a first-class row with Logan and Berdan. Grinell was in Hays City and so was Logan. No question about that. The three of them are reported to have got together at the bank. The argument got so hot it could be heard on the street. When Grinell came out, he was steaming, they say."

"Is that so?" Teton jerked out, seizing on the news with delight. "Reckon he's raisin' hell because they ain't come through with the pay-off for his vote."

"I don't believe that's the trouble," Tinsley disagreed. "Grinell got his; I've known for several days that his place stands free and clear, the mortgage satisfied in full. I had Carter dig it out of the records at the courthouse."

"Wal!" Teton snorted fiercely, to a chorus of surprised grunts from the others. 'What do you know about that? Bribed him! Jest as we figgered!" He was angry then, glaring at Tinsley. "What was the idea of not sayin' anythin' about it till now?"

The tall man grinned. And not because he was amused. "I call that good, Teton—expecting me to come running to you with information I paid Carter to get for me. Only yesterday you were saying that you had done all right without a lawyer and saved some money. That ought to be easy if you can make the other fellow foot the bill."

Les and Remy Dufors were in the group. They snickered at Teton's expense and some of the others smiled. Infuriated, Teton growled, "That's a hell of a slant to take! I figgered we was all pullin' together!"

"That's what I thought till you showed me I was mistaken." Tinsley believed he had him where he wanted him now and he let him have it with both barrels. "You haven't bothered to get my opinion about this or that. I suppose I should be thankful for the privilege of being permitted to be here. That's all right with me; I don't mind the brushoff. But it burns me to see you going behind Ria's back with whatever it is you've got up your sleeve."

"By damn, that ain't so!" the old man howled, so consumed with anger that he trembled like a reed in the wind. "I appreciate all that gal's done for us and I ain't tryin' to take the play away from her. I'm tellin' you, Tinsley, you want to git yore facts straight, or you'll have to eat 'em!"

He was guilty as charged. He knew it, and what was worse, he realized that the others knew it too. Tinsley let him rant on until he was mired in his own vehement but unconvincing protestations.

"You make more noise than I do, Teton," the tall

man said quietly, "but it doesn't add up to anything. You were busy all yesterday afternoon with some scheme, and you were at it again this morning until I walked up. Whatever it is you're up to may be all to the good, but everyone of us has a right to know what the commitment is and decide whether he wants to go along with it or not. I advise you to put it on the line when Ria gets here."

He turned to walk away only to have Carson Platt call him back. Platt said, "Have you any idea what Grinell's argument was about?"

"Not the slightest. But if he's fallen out with Logan and Berdan, it could mean more to us than anything we'll accomplish here."

The familiar figure of Buck Ruxton, astride his gray horse, approached the fence from the direction of the engineer's camp. He tethered the gray to the endgate of a wagon and walked off by himself.

Ria arrived a few minutes later. Tinsley thought she looked refreshed and rested. She was hatless this morning. The sun never bothered her for she had one of those rare skins that loses a tan overnight. Her hair was pulled back from her face and caught behind with a ribbon. She raised a hand in greeting. Teton joined her as soon as she got down. Their conversation was animated and, Tinsley judged, not altogether to her liking.

The crowd continued to grow. By eight o'clock, it was approaching the size of the previous day's gathering, with about the same percentage of women and children. Carson Platt's Mormon friends from Hays City had.enjoyed the excitement and were out in force again. Ria had a word for many of them after she finished with Teton. She found Tinsley then and walked aside with him. He wasn't surprised to have her say, "I understand you had words with Teton."

"Some rather sharp words," he acknowledged. "Did he tell you what he's up to?"

"Yes. He's as cunning as a fox, Clark. We're all agreed, I think, that Judge Littleton will sign an order on Jerry this morning. When Mr. Ruxton tries to serve it, he won't be able to find Jerry. Teton's got him hid out. He refused to say where, and I thought it best not to insist."

"That's a smooth trick—if it works," Tinsley had to admit, relieved that it was nothing more serious. "I still don't like the way Teton went about it. Certainly you were entitled to know. I suppose he told you what I had to say about Grinell."

"Yes, and I'm wondering why you kept me in the dark."

"Only because Britt said yesterday that he wished I'd brought you in. I promised myself I would. There's another matter the three of us ought to discuss. From the first, Ria, Britt has insisted that our best if not only hope of winning out is to prove that the voting wasn't on the up and up. If Grinell has come to the parting of the ways with Berdan and Logan, he may be induced to talk. That's what I meant when I told Platt how important I thought it was. The first chance we get, we better see Britt."

Ria signified her compliance. "We can't go any further without legal advice. In fact, we've got to organize, Clark, and ask for money to work with. That'll mean choosing someone to lead us."

The tall man smiled and said, "You can count on my vote."

Ria shook her head. "I've gone as far as I can; it's time for me to step aside. You're the man for the job."

Tinsley refused to take it seriously. "They'd never place that much confidence in me."

"No?" Ria queried. "We'll see."

Half an hour passed, when Berdan and Logan drove up to the fence and looked the situation over. Then, without getting out of the buggy, Berdan turned his team and drove off. That they were returning to town at once was fairly certain. Proof of it came two hours later when a court attendant appeared in quest of the sheriff. Papers were handed to him. If any doubt remained as to their contents, it was dispelled when Ruxton began looking for Jerry Downs. He questioned Teton and Ria, who disclaimed any knowledge of Jerry's whereabouts.

"You haven't seen nothin' at all of him this mornin', I reckon," Buck declared with heavy irony. The remark was directed at Teton rather than Ria. The sheriff thought he knew what the game was.

"Nope, I ain't seen a thing of him since last evenin'," Teton replied.

"That sounds like it might be the truth," Ruxton rapped out. "Where have you hid him?"

"Now look here, Buck," the old man protested, "you know I wouldn't do nothin' like that. Chances are Jerry has jest wandered off somewheres."

Ruxton got into the saddle and rode up to the house, idle as he believed it to be, and looked for Downs there. He was back at the fence presently, his mustache standing up belligerently.

"Buck's got blood in his eye," Tinsley warned Ria. "He means business this time."

Ruxton walked up to them, calling Teton over as he did. "I leaned over backwards for you folks yesterday. Not much appreciation in you, givin' me the run around this way. . . . Ria, who's in charge here, you or Teton?"

"Nobody's in charge!" the old man jerked out before she could answer. He was shrewd enough to surmise what was coming. Trying to head it off, he said, "We're here on our own; everyone free to do as he pleases." He

turned to Les Dufors and half a dozen others for confirmation. They seconded it without understanding Teton's purpose.

"I guess not," Ruxton contradicted flatly. "This demonstration has got a head and a tail. Didn't you round up these folks, Ria, and git 'em out here?"

Though Teton shook his head for her to say no, she said, "That's too well known for me to attempt to deny it, Mr. Ruxton."

Buck's eyes narrowed beneath his bushy brows. "I don't like to do this but I got no choice." He pulled out a legal paper and put it in her hand, saying, "That's a Jane Doe order from the District Court, Judge Oliver Littleton presiding, instructin' you to remove these people from the right of way, forthwith."

Dufors and the others growled an angry protest. Teton let out a blast. "That's a stinkin' trick, handin' this gal a paper! Why didn't you hand it to me?"

"I got one for you," Buck informed him. "I don't know whether it's a case of the tail shakin' the dog or not, but seein' as how you've got so much to say, I reckon you're the spokesman for these folks." Before the old man could back away, Ruxton shoved the paper into his hand.

Without bothering to glance at it, Teton tore it to bits and threw it on the ground. "That's what I think of yore John Doe order!" he screeched. "If Littleton was here, I'd rub his nose in it! I ain't orderin' no one to git off'n this range. And that goes, Ruxton!"

"You can do as you please," Buck observed without feeling. "I'll give you a couple hours to think it over."

He walked away and Tinsley thought of what Britt Carter had said about Tom Lamb's shrewdness. Obviously, Lamb had foreseen that it might be impossible to serve Jerry.

Les Dufors shouldered up between Teton and Ria.

"What are we goin' to do?" he demanded, his face rocky and wrathful. "We goin' to put our tails between our legs and run, or what?"

"Just a minute, Les," Ria told him. "Teton and I will have to talk this over." She was aroused by the sudden turn of events but in no danger of losing her poise. "If there's any way we can stand fast without defying the law, we'll do it."

She called Teton aside. It was immediately apparent to Tinsley and the others that the two were in violent disagreement. They saw Teton gesticulating truculently and Ria continuing to shake her head firmly. Finally, they parted and she came over to Tinsley and asked him to help her up into a wagon. Standing on the seat, she addressed the crowd. He was proud of her as she stood there, tense, her face paler than usual but in full command of herself.

"You know what the situation is," she said, her voice reaching to the edge of the crowd. "Teton and I can't agree on what we must do, so you'll have to decide for yourselves."

Many were puzzled and silent. Others showed plainly that they were with Teton.

"You came here at my urging," Ria continued, aware of the divided opinion of her listeners but refusing to be dismayed by it. "But don't let that sway you. If you feel that you want to remain where you are, that's up to you; all I can do is ask you to move aside as I shall. We've got a long, uphill fight ahead of us. Things haven't gone as we expected, neither have we lost ground. This isn't the beginning or end of anything; we can go on and make our opposition felt in many ways. But whatever we do, don't let us defeat ourselves by defying the law."

Tinsley helped her down. "That wasn't much of a speech," she said disparagingly.

"There wasn't any need for a speech," said he. "You let them know where you stand. That's all that was necessary."

A few feet away, Teton had climbed over the wheel of a wagon and was getting the attention of the crowd. "I got no quarrel with Ria!" he shouted. "We jest see this different! Make up your mind whether you're goin' to be bluffed out by a piece of paper or stick it out here with me!"

A buzz of voices rose from the crowd and in the tangle of wagons and other rigs there was a confused movement. Ria glanced at Les Dufors. She expected him to stay with Teton. The desire to do just that was written plainly on Dufors' face. Pulling him the other way was his loyalty to Ria. "I can't throw you down," he growled.

He caught his horse and fell back a few yards with her and Tinsley. Remy Dufors and three or four others followed. Out of the jumbled mass of vehicles, as many as half a dozen detached themselves and headed their way. Carson Platt moved among his people, advising them what to do. When he got into his buckboard and drove over to Ria, it was the signal for the other Mormons to do likewise.

Minutes passed before noses could be counted and a definite result established. When it was possible to do so, Tinsley saw that fully half of the crowd was staying with Teton. No one had any thought, however, of leaving the scene. There was drama here that was pregnant with suspense, and building to a climax. How soon it would come, and what the march of events would produce, they didn't know; but they were determined not to miss it.

Red caught Tinsley's eye. "This spells trouble, Boss," he muttered under his breath. The tall man nodded and said, "I'm afraid it does."

11

BUCK RUXTON was a lonely figure as he hovered near the fence, keenly alive to what was happening around him but saying not a word. It was approximately ten o'clock when he walked up to Teton and said, "You've had time enough to decide what you want to do. Is this it?"

"It shore is!" Teton said emphatically.

Ruxton got on his horse and departed for town. He was back before noon and served a summons on Teton. "The Judge has cited you for contempt," he told him. "You're due in court tomorrow mornin' at ten A.M. If you ain't there, I'll come after you."

Teton took it lightly. He had had, as he so often boasted, some experience with such legal tactics. "Littleton may have to wait up a few days before he gits a chance to use his jawbone on me," he informed Buck. "It's jest possible I may be took sick between now and tomorrow mornin'. If so, I'll have a lawyer in court to represent me. He'll have a doctor's certificate and be ready to post bond for my appearance at a later date."

Buck shrugged disinterestedly. "You're as slippery as an eel, I know. Slip out of this if you can."

Back in Hays City, Nip Logan echoed that identical thought to Berdan and Tom Lamb, the company's attorney. "I know Teton Williams from away back," he declared, with his usual testiness. "If you fellas think you've got him on the hook, you got another guess com-

in'; he'll wriggle away from you and hold us up for days."

"You're wrong, Nip," Berdan argued. "Ruxton may have to go after him, but he'll bring him in and the Judge will find him guilty and slap a fine on him that'll jar his teeth."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Logan growled. "If Ruxton gits him in tomorrow mornin', Littleton will fine him, but that's as far as he'll go; he won't order him locked up. Williams will pay his fine, and ten minutes after he leaves the courtroom, he'll be on his way back to the fence to begin all over."

After Lamb left, Nip had more to say. Berdan threw up his hands in desperation. "We can't do it, Nip!" he protested. "We've got to take things easy!"

"Easy, my foot! If we'd gone into that crowd yesterday, they'd have run like sheep. Stallin' around like this, callin' in the law, only gives 'em more spunk to fight us another day. I'll open a way across that range. This time of the year, I always bring down the stuff we turn out in the Buckskins in the spring. After runnin' wild for three or four months, they're a mean bunch and mighty hard to handle. That'll be my out if there's any kickback to what I propose to do; I'll claim they jest got away from us; and that's all there'll be to that. . . . You leave it to me!"

Tinsley noticed early in the afternoon that Bill Starr and all but four or five of the guards had pulled away from the engineers' camp. He had no explanation for it nor could he get a satisfactory one from Dufors or the others who had followed Ria. He looked for Teton, but the old man had left for town, presumably to see Britt Carter or some other attorney. Ruxton had gone in, too.

Shortly after five, a heavy cloud of dust poured down the trail out of the mountains and moved into the head

of the valley. North of Downs' line there was nothing but unfenced public domain.

"That's cattle," Tinsley said, glancing at Carson Platt and Dufors. "Two hundred head or more. Whose stuff can it be?"

"Most likely Double Diamond," Platt answered. "Logan has some mountain range. He keeps some stuff up there till the grass goes. About now, he always brings it down and turns it out on his home range."

"They'll drive around Box D, hit the Paradise road and come in that way till they're just west of town," Remy Dufors explained. "They'll turn south then and drive across the Sweetwater at the upper ford."

Tinsley shook his head dubiously. "I hope you're right."

His tone was such that Ria picked him up. "What do you mean by that?"

He sensed her sudden anxiety. "Just a wild thought," he told her, sorry that he had spoken. "We couldn't figure out what had become of Starr and his men; we know now; they're driving those steers, and driving them hard."

"Got 'em spooked up plenty," little Remy muttered uneasily. His brother nodded, and Carson Platt said, "They're high-tailing it, for sure!"

"Go on, Clark, finish what you were saying," Ria urged.

"It may sound crazy," said Tinsley, "but I'm wondering if they don't intend to drive through here and scatter us right and left."

"They wouldn't dare!" she exclaimed, aghast at the thought of children and the women being trampled down in that fashion.

"It's just a thought," he told her. "But as for daring to do it—they'll dare anything they think they can get

away with, especially Logan. The law may be moving too slowly for him."

The plunging herd came nearer. Starr and the other riders were easily recognizable by now. Ten minutes later, Remy Dufors said, "They ain't goin' to swing around Box D or they'd have made their move by now!"

"By God, they're headin' straight for us!" his brother Les cried.

There wasn't any doubt of it in Tinsley's mind. He spoke to Red and Purdy telling them to get the women and children in the wagons and have them drive to the house at once. He turned to Ria. "I want you to go to the house, too. Don't argue, Ria; you can do more there than you can here."

He spurred over to Teton's followers, who were alive to what impended. "Those steers are coming through!" he shouted. "Send your women and children to the house as we're doing! You've got only a few minutes!"

It was remarkable how readily they accepted his orders and permitted him to take charge, now that an emergency faced them. The grudges and suspicions were certainly put aside, if not forgotten. After hurrying the noncombatants on their way to the house, he had both factions form one compact group, with the remaining wagons and rigs bunched, the teams and horses facing the center of the circle, where the old men and those who were unarmed were instructed to place themselves and hold the animals.

It left him a force of better than forty, all mounted, to face the onslaught. That force he divided into two groups, with himself in charge of one wing and Dan Honeywell the other. His instructions were simple. Not a man there but had had some experience in turning stampeding cattle.

The bellowing, maddened steers swept up the fence, heads lowered and their sleek flanks glistening

through the dust. The Double Diamond riders were cursing and yelling wildly and slapping the cows nearest them with their coiled ropes, in a pretended attempt to turn the herd.

The leaders plunged through the opening then. One of them struck a naked fence post and snapped it off as though it were a match stick. Tinsley's wing drove in at them from the left and Honeywell from the right, their guns bucking as they fired over the heads of the cattle. It had no appreciable effect on their mad rush. The cows forming the spearhead crashed into the massed wagons and were driven to their knees by the crushing weight of those that followed. Panic seized the teams and they could not be held. The circle fell apart and the men who were trapped in what had been the center of it were knocked flat, as horses and cows ran over them. Some went down screaming, seriously injured.

Though all was confusion, colliding with the horses and wagons had split the herd and checked its mad flight. Moving quickly, both Tinsley and Honeywell closed in with their men and turned the steers—a few leaders at first and then the whole herd. Bill Starr and his Double Diamond riders raced up and did their best to swing the cattle back.

Starr, riding recklessly, crossed in front of Tinsley, his coiled rope held high. As he was bringing it down to slap a steer in the face, the tall man charged into him and all but unseated the Double Diamond foreman. As the latter struggled to right himself, Tinsley cut in between him and the cows and rode him back. For a moment, they confronted each other. Starr's eyes were murderous. Ignoring the gun in Clark's hand, he brought his rope up with a quick flick of his arm and slashed out savagely.

The rope laid Tinsley's right cheekbone open. He gritted his teeth against the impulse to drop Starr, who

was flashing around the herd, intent on picking up his men.

Red and little Remy had witnessed the incident. They turned a cow back and got it going in the right direction before they spurred up to Tinsley. "Why didn't you bust him, Boss?" Red whipped out. "I'd have got him myself if I'd thought you was goin' to let him git away!"

"Shootin' is too good for that bastard!" Remy snarled. "But for you, Tinsley, the wimmenfolks and the young uns would have been caught out here and smashed to hell!"

"It's bad enough as it is!" The tall man had to shout to make himself heard above the din. "Keep this stuff moving! We'll have it on the run in a minute or two!"

Scattered gunfire continued. Tinsley had no time to inquire whether the shots had any other purpose than to persuade the cows to turn tail. They were definitely in motion toward the fence, eyes glassy with fear and heads lowered as they crowded their new leaders. The front ranks had no sooner poured through the opening than the entire herd began to run. There was no stopping them now. Three Double Diamond men, caught squarely in the path of the stampede, not only made no attempt to check the frenzied steers but were hard put to save themselves by racing toward the Sweetwater.

With daylight showing between the wrecked wagons and the retreating cows, Tinsley swung that way. Guns were cracking in that direction, the shots closely bunched. Their meaning became instantly clear when he saw Honeywell throw his gun away and clutch his saddle horn in agony. Starr had got his men through the fence. One of them fired again, Purdy Roberts his target. The shot went wide. Purdy, Remy and a third man, a stranger to Tinsley, turned their guns on him and the Double Diamond rider toppled out of his saddle. Starr had a quick look at him. Convinced that the

man was dead, he ordered the others to pull out at once.

Tinsley watched them ride away. Once they were out of gun range, they slowed down and rode carelessly. "We're going after him as soon as we can get through the fence," he said, his mouth hard. "You see what you can do for Honeywell, Les. We've got others here who need attention."

"Yeh," Les grunted. "Old man Shepherd is bad hurt. We'll have to git him and a couple others to town right off."

They got through the fence several minutes later and struck off across the plain at a sharp hand gallop. Starr and his crew were keeping wide of the cows. It was evidently his intention to let them run themselves out before he attempted to round them up and either move them back into the mountains or drive them to the Double Diamond home range.

"Did you notice, Boss, that this was all Double Diamond?" Red called to the tall man. "No Bar Cross or 44 men in it. It was Logan's party all the way 'round."

"I noticed," said Tinsley. It was his plan to stay in close to the stampeding cattle, thereby giving Starr the impression that this foray by the valley men was only a further pursuit of the herd. When they were in position to cut Starr off, they were to swing his way and drive him toward the river. He instructed Red accordingly and told him to drop back and inform the others.

Starr failed to surmise their intention until it was too late. He had lagged behind his men, and now, when he made a belated attempt to catch up, Tinsley and Red flashed in between and he had no recourse but to swing off toward the river, running his pony hard. His crew, realizing he was cut off, made a halfhearted effort to break through to him. Red and half a dozen others rode them back. They could have resorted to their guns and tried to shoot their way through, but they apparently

had no stomach for that. "Them boys ain't spreadin' themselves for Bill Starr!" Red growled. "Be okay with them if we run him up a tree!"

Starr tried repeatedly to escape up the river and down, but Tinsley always had a man in position to turn him. The only way he could go was toward the Sweetwater, and the half-circle of riders closing in on him were rapidly reducing retreat in that direction. In a matter of minutes, he had been pushed so far back that only a narrow strip of ground lay between him and the bank, which fell away sheer for ten feet to the rushing stream. He jerked out his gun and sat there, hunched over in his saddle.

Tinsley held up his hand, halting the advance, with less than a hundred yards separating them. He then passed word along the line that when he gave the signal they were to make a concerted rush.

His hand went up a moment later and they charged in. Without firing a shot, Starr wheeled his horse and plunged off the bank. When he struck the water, he lost his seat and was flung into the water. Not a good swimmer, he was lucky enough to catch a stirrup as his horse struck out for the opposite bank and he hung on and was dragged ashore. Standing there on a shelf of sand, he broke his gun, blew the water out of it, and emptied it pointlessly at the score of jeering men watching him. They, in turn, were unable to stop him as he picked his way up the far bank with his horse and struck off in the direction of town.

Tinsley laughed for the first time that day. Little Remy Dufors looked at him askance. "By gravy, I swear this was what you wanted!"

"Exactly, Remy. He couldn't ramrod a chicken coop around here after this. Even his own crew wouldn't come through for him."

"I dunno!" Remy growled. "This won't be the end of it. He'll come at you ag'in."

The tall man considered it for a moment. Blood was still running down his cheek and spattering his shirt. "I'll be surprised if he doesn't," he said soberly as he dabbed at the cut with a handkerchief. "I'll try to be ready for him."

12

TINSLEY led the way back to the fence to be greeted by the news that Dan Honeywell was dead. Link Currie, the Double Diamond puncher who had killed him, still lay where he had dropped. Carson Platt, with a sensitiveness few of the others possessed, had thrown a piece of canvas over the body.

"The news musta got to town in a hurry, Boss," Red observed. "Ruxton's back, and so is Teton."

The immediate Box D range looked as though a cyclone had struck it, smashed, overturned wagons and lighter rigs, wheels locked, everywhere the ground littered with the remnants of lunch baskets and personal belongings. The horses that had drawn the vehicles had either broken away in the face of the stampede or been unhitched since and led off. The wounded were already on their way to Hays City. Honeywell lay huddled in the wagon to which he had been carried.

Clark was not surprised to find that Ria had returned from the house. She was kneeling beside a little girl who had been asleep in a wagon and left behind by her confused mother. The child was hysterical but had miraculously escaped injury. When the child had been quieted, Ria got up with the little girl in her arms and asked Bud Downs to take the tot to the house. It was only then that she was aware that the tall man had been standing there, watching her. His appearance wrenched a sharp gasp of anxiety from her.

"I must look a sight," he said, with a reassuring smile.

"Don't be alarmed; it's just a cut. It doesn't amount to anything."

"It needs attention, Clark," she insisted.

"I'll take care of it later, Ria. You know what happened, of course—I mean the way they came through."

She nodded soberly. "You were right; there's nothing they won't do. . . . Dan killed—Mr. Sheperd so badly injured that I don't believe Dr. Perry will be able to save him." She paused and studied his eyes for a long moment. "Clark—what did you do with Bill Starr?"

"Chased him into the river." He saw that she was somehow relieved. In a sterner tone, he said, "Don't waste any sympathy on Bill Starr."

"I'm not," she replied carefully. "He deserves the worst that can happen to him. I was only thinking of you. . . . Have you spoken to Teton?"

"No. What's he got to say now?"

"I overheard him telling Les that the cows wouldn't have got through if he'd been here."

The tall man's face was suddenly rocky. "He might better be saying that his stubbornness was responsible for what happened. We had gone as far as there was any sense in going. We were licked. It wasn't necessary to hang on and have it proved to us this way. The surveyors will go through now. . . . You know any further resistance is senseless, Ria."

"It would be worse than senseless," she agreed soberly. "There's no point in waiting; let's have it out with him now."

They found Teton and Ruxton surrounded by a group of men. Teton was bristling and Buck was so angry that no trace remained of the wooden-faced calm that the Sweetwater country had come to expect of him. "I've been accused of a lot of things in my time," he growled, "but sayin' I got out of the way because I knew this was comin' off, takes the cake! I stuck it out here

till I saw you leave. I figured it was safe for me to ride in and git my supper."

Teton backed down an inch or two. "All I got to say is it's mighty peculiar that you got hungry jest at the right time, so you wouldn't see nothin' you could testify to!"

"Where were you?" Buck rapped. "You left before I did, and you got back half an hour after me. What were you doin'—hidin' out in town so you wouldn't be in no danger of gittin' a slug in your carcass?"

Teton appeared to be about to have a stroke. "That's a damn lie!" he screeched. "You know it's a lie!"

"Of course it is," Buck snapped back. "And you're lyin' when you accuse me of bein' a party to this business. Suppose we stop the name callin' and put the blame where it belongs. You overplayed your hand in defyin' the law. But for you Dan Honeywell would be alive. How are you goin' to face his wife and kids? And there may be others—old George Sheperd for one. If you've got any idea of bein' out here tomorrow, I predict you'll be here alone."

"I'll be here, and there'll be plenty with me!" the old man blared.

"No, there won't," Les Dufors declared. "You bit off more'n you can chew this time, Teton. Tryin' to block the right of way is all over; we'll square our account with the company, but this ain't the place nor the way to do it."

"I agree with you, Les," Carson Platt spoke up. "It was a foul deed, cutting into us with a herd of wild cattle. But you invited it, Teton. There's no blinking that fact. Tinsley did a remarkable job in turning them back."

"It would have ended different if he had moved the wagons up to the fence and blocked the openin'," Teton growled stubbornly.

"And we'd have had a dozen men killed instead of one," Carson Platt returned. "I'm glad you weren't present. It's a wise man who knows when he's beaten and prepares to fight another day."

They saw Tinsley and Ria then and fell into an embarrassed silence.

"We overheard what you had to say," she told them. "This is a defeat for us. I'm more to blame than Teton. I know he meant well in refusing to knuckle under. Many of you felt as he did. I don't hold it against any of you. I made the real blunder in thinking we had a legal right to gather here. If I had consulted a good lawyer like Britt Carter, all this trouble would have been avoided. With everything we own at stake, it's utterly ridiculous, when you stop to think of it, that we've come this far without forming a tightly knit organization, with a designated leader with real authority, and an attorney to advise us, and funds with which to carry on our fight. . . . If we're ever going to do anything about it, now is the time."

"You are right," bearded Carson Platt agreed. He was a mild-mannered man but none the less forceful for that. In the past two days he had shown that he commanded powerful support. "Accusing this one or that will not help us a bit. If we can't bury our differences and pull together, what chance have we got? Logan will build his dam and dig his canal, and we'll be at his mercy." He glanced at Tinsley. "We're airing our opinions. What have you to say?"

"You've stated our case perfectly," the tall man declared. "There's little I can add to it. There'll be some repercussions to what occurred this afternoon. It was more Logan's work than Berdan's—not that it matters. Whether the law will take any action against him is a question. I'm not qualified to say that we can force the

issue. But this I know, gentlemen: we've got to bind our wounds and go on."

There were murmurs of approval from all save Teton. He stood there with a wintry look on his hard-bitten face. Finally, he said, "When some dirty crook takes advantage of me, I never bin one to turn the other cheek. But I ain't goin' to be no dog in the manger about this. God knows I can't fight 'em alone; and as Ria says, we got ever'thin' at stake." He turned to her. "I'd made other plans, but I'll march into court in the mornin', give Littleton a piece of my mind and pay my fine."

"Will you, Teton?" Ria exclaimed, her eyes bright with gratitude.

"I said I would!" the old man snapped. "You call a meetin' for tomorrow afternoon. Make it at yore place; that's central. See that someone's there from every outfit that's on our side."

There was one who wouldn't be there. But nobody mentioned that; unity had been restored, and all took fresh heart. Ria's suggestion that they make an effort to have Britt Carter present met with their approval.

"We'll leave it to you to fetch him, Tinsley," said Teton. "In view of the work he's bin doin' for you, it shouldn't be no trick to convince him that the time's come for him to git in this fight."

"I'll have him there," Tinsley promised. "At what hour, Ria?"

"We'll call the meeting to order at three o'clock."

Ruxton had been a silent listener. He walked away now. Les called him back. "What about our takin' Dan to town?" he asked. "Are you goin' to make us wait till the coroner gits here?"

"Seein' as how you've already moved the body, I don't see any point in waitin' for Bevans," said Buck. "It may be some time before he gets out here with an undertaker. . . . Go ahead."

Half an hour later he was still at the fence, keeping a lonely vigil over Link Currie and what remained of the wrecked wagons. Save for him, the Box D range was deserted.

Tinsley saw the doctor in Hays City and had two stitches taken in his cheek. Before going up to see Carter, he bought a clean shirt and made himself presentable.

The elderly attorney was well informed regarding what had occurred at Box D. It was difficult to believe that there was anyone in Hays City who didn't know it by now. The town was buzzing, with feeling running high against Berdan and Logan. Harvey Stock and other stockmen, who were supporting the water company, were scarcely mentioned.

Carter readily consented to Tinsley's request. "I've stayed out of this as long as I can," he confessed. "A man lives in a small town like this and makes acquaintances and accepts them as honorable men. It's hard to break with them. But there's a limit. I'll be at the Eatons tomorrow, and not because I'm looking for a fee."

That night, rocks were thrown through the bank windows, shattering them completely. Hays City openly expressed its satisfaction. Val Almquist, the town marshal, reported that he was unable to discover who was responsible for the vandalism. It was said in some quarters that Val had not tried too hard, which was appreciated.

George Sheperd died during the night. He was a retired stockman, once the owner of the present Bar Cross outfit, and widely respected. His passing added fuel to the fire. It may or may not have influenced Judge Littleton, but when Teton appeared before him on the contempt citation, next morning, and pleaded guilty, he was given a suspended sentence. Likewise, it may or may not have had something to do with the announcement by Vince McDermitt, the District Attorney, that Link

Currie, the Double Diamond cowboy, had killed Dan Honeywell and come to his own death as the result of gunfire directed at him in self-defense by Honeywell's companions, and that there would be no prosecution.

Further proof that Berdan and Logan had overstepped themselves came when Harvey Stock and Jim Matthews, of Bar Cross, rode into town just before noon and publicly condemned them for the action they had taken. Furthermore, they insisted unequivocally that they had had no previous knowledge of it.

Berdan and Logan had gone out to the right of way, where, unopposed, the engineers were moving across Box D. Stock and Matthews, bent on speaking their minds, followed them there. What passed between the four was not reported, but Carter ran into Stock on the street, just before leaving for the meeting, and the latter was still fuming and protesting that he was in no way responsible for the tactics Logan and Berdan had employed.

"Very likely this action was taken without your knowledge," Carter told him. "But it shouldn't surprise you; you've had to close your eyes to a number of things you didn't like. When you've had enough, you'll break away just as Tinsley did."

"I don't know," Stock muttered unhappily. "I wish I could see my way clear to doing it. But that's easier said than done. I'm in for ten thousand already, and so is Jim. If we pull out, we'll lose that money for sure; and we'll still have to come through with the rest of what we signed up for."

"I'm afraid your ten thousand is gone, no matter what you do," said Carter. "But you won't be caught for any more if the charter is revoked and the State orders the company dissolved."

Harvey Stock gazed at him incredulously. "Britt, you certainly don't believe that's likely to happen."

"But I do. The Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association isn't the innocent little co-operative you and Morgan Tinsley were led to believe it was. You're a shrewd man, and so was Morg. But you had the wool pulled over your eyes. If you had it to do over, you wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole."

"I don't know as I would," the owner of 44 admitted. "A lawsuit may develop out of what happened yesterday, but that's no reason to say the company may lose its charter."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Carter observed. "I'm not free to tell you what I had in mind. . . . How much money do you figure has been paid into the company, Harvey?"

"Ninety to a hundred thousand dollars."

"And that doesn't include the fifty thousand the bank advanced. No part of that loan has been repaid, has it?"

"Of course not. The construction company has to be paid—"

"Only as the work progresses. Isn't that a fact?"

"Say, what are you getting at, Britt?" Stock demanded testily.

"Just this, Harvey—you and Matthews were named to the board of directors. When did you have your last meeting?"

"Well, there's never been any formal meeting of the board—"

"I thought not," the white-haired attorney declared. "I advise you to force a meeting and inquire into what's become of all that money. You're entitled to an explanation. If you get a satisfactory one, I'll be surprised."

He had learned what he wanted to know. If no part of the bank loan had been repaid, he felt it was more reason than ever to believe that Berdan and Logan had purchased a sizable block of Government land in the lower valley for their own private profit and used com-

pany funds. Furthermore, he had put a bee in Stock's bonnet, as the saying had it, and he was confident the cowman and his friend Jim Matthews would get their heads together and demand an accounting, which he doubted they would get.

"It'll open their eyes still further," he said to himself as he got in his buggy for the long drive down the river. "Berdan and Nip are very likely to find themselves standing alone presently."

13

"You sure pulled Bill Starr's tail feathers—chasing him into the river like that! I'd have given my shirt to have been there! Bud was at the fence with some of the other fellows, and I'd have been there, too, but for Ria's yammering about me keeping out of trouble!"

"That was good advice," Tinsley said. He had arrived at the Eatons a little early and sat on the gallery with Ritchie, who had discarded his crutches and got around with only a slight limp. "This fight has moved out ahead of you boys. If you want to help us win, wait till you're called on. Something may be found for you to do."

"I hope that ain't just talk, Tinsley," the youngster remarked with great soberness. "I wish you were running things."

The tall man smiled. "So do I," he said. "But why, Ritchie?"

"I reckon you wouldn't treat us like a bunch of kids the way Ria does. As Pop says, you got a lot of savvy. And that's a funny thing, Tinsley—us Eatons forgetting bygones and making up with you. Even Mom has a good word for you. I guess she thinks there may be something between you and Ria."

The tall man shifted about uneasily and tried to turn the conversation. Ritchie was enjoying himself, however, and with the fiendish persistence of nineteen, he said, "If there is, Tinsley, it'll be the first time Ria's

given anyone a tumble since Win Matthews went off to the Philippines and was lost in action."

Fortunately for Tinsley, Ria stepped out on the gallery and rescued him from his embarrassment. "The two of you seem to be getting on very pleasantly," she said, giving her brother a questioning glance that quickly erased his baffling smile. "You might go down to the barn and help set up the benches, Ritchie. It's almost three. There won't be too many of us this afternoon," she continued to Tinsley, as the youngster left. He was no sooner gone than she asked what Ritchie had been saying.

"Oh, complaining because you had refused to let him show up at Downs' fence yesterday and the day before. You must have been riding herd on him pretty hard."

"And with good reason, Clark. I don't want him to get into any more trouble. . . . Isn't that Mr. Carter's buggy? I'm sure it is; I recognize his horse."

"Some others showing up, too," said Tinsley. "They'll have plenty to talk about when they get here. They know by now what happened in town last night and this morning. We took a licking yesterday, but Berdan and Logan are paying a high price for their victory. When Teton drew a suspended sentence and McDermitt announced there would be no prosecution in the killing of Currie, that was evidence enough that the wind was blowing in a different direction. I won't be surprised if the *Dispatch* flops over to our side. We've got Hays City solidly behind us."

"We haven't done too badly," Ria murmured. "But we've paid a high price, too. I saw Cora Honeywell for a few minutes this morning. . . . Left alone with three children, the oldest not yet ten. You can imagine how she feels."

"Indeed I can," the tall man declared sympathetically. "The least we can do is to offer to help her out."

Carter had turned off the road and was driving up to the house. Tinsley and Ria stepped off the gallery to greet him. Teton and the Dufors rode in a minute later. Behind them came Carson Platt and the others. By three o'clock, all were present. As Tinsley had predicted, they had much to talk about. They were aware that the surveyors were moving unhindered across Box D. That fact was not ignored, but their interest in the developments the morning had brought in Hays City was greater. Britt Carter was no stranger to any of them. Since he had come directly from town, they questioned him, hoping for the latest news.

"I haven't heard of any further developments," he told them. "I believe one is in the making, however. I know you will call on me to make some remarks after the meeting is called to order. If you don't mind, I'd prefer mentioning it then."

They began moving to the barn presently. The old attorney found an opportunity to acquaint Tinsley with what Harvey Stock had had to say.

"Harvey and Matthews are tottering on the brink, Clark. I believe we'll have them in our camp before another week passes. If we get the word we expect from Washington, I'll guarantee you that they'll jump our way."

Tinsley was frankly elated by the news. "What a lift that would give us! If they break away, Dog Iron will follow suit. The only support the company will have left will be the little outfits like Grinell. This was what you were referring to a minute ago, of course."

Britt nodded. "When I left town, I was undecided as to whether I would mention it to the meeting. I gave it some thought on the way down and came to the conclusion I would. It can't do any harm; what we do and say here will be in strictest confidence. You may wonder, Clark, how shrewd men like your father and Stock could

be taken in so completely. On anything pertaining to cattle, you couldn't fool them; but they were inexperienced when it came to a proposition like this. Berdan showed Nip Logan how the game could be worked, and Nip was unscrupulous enough to go into the scheme."

Ria called the meeting to order, as she had many others, and after stating why it had been called, spoke at length on the need of a formal organization, with legal counsel and funds to be subscribed by the members.

"How much money do we need?" Carson Platt asked.

"I should think a thousand dollars would be enough for the present. If we need more later, we can ask for it."

The sum was raised easily enough. When Ria announced that nominations were in order, she expected a number of names to be placed before the meeting, especially for the office of president, and that the harmony that had prevailed till now would end abruptly. It was her intention to nominate Clark. To her amazement, and his, Teton Williams leaped to his feet and nominated Tinsley, Carson Platt for vice-president, and herself for secretary and treasurer. Remy Dufors promptly seconded that slate and before he could sit down, Les popped up to move that the nominations be closed. It was all over and done with as quickly as that, and Teton, who had arranged it, settled back with a triumphant twinkle in his eyes. No one was fooled nor took exception to his maneuvering. "If he couldn't be boss, he was goin' to be sure he'd say who was," Jerry Downs said to Frank Eaton. That wasn't the entire story; little as he liked to admit it, Teton had found much to admire in Clark Tinsley.

On taking the chair, Tinsley thanked the members for their newly-found confidence in him and spoke briefly and with deep feeling regarding the blow that

had befallen Dan Honeywell's family. "We have our own troubles, but I'm sure you will agree with me that we'll have to take time out and do whatever we can for Mrs. Honeywell. Dan was one of us. That's reason enough in itself for any help we can give her."

The organization was still without a name. There were a dozen suggestions. The Sweetwater Valley had never had a stockmen's association. After much debating, some of it rather warm, Frank Eaton's suggestion that they call themselves the Sweetwater Stockmen's Association was adopted. The new association's first act was to engage Britt Carter for its legal counsel.

"I'm not going to make a long-winded speech," Britt said as he took the floor. "I have several things to say and you perhaps have some questions you'd like me to answer. Several have asked me if we can't bring an action against the water company for trespass and damages suffered yesterday afternoon. My advice would be to forget it. Those cows were sent through deliberately. No question about that. If we bring an action, the defense will be that the herd got out of hand and that what resulted was not due to negligence. You've moved cattle many times and I know some of you have had trouble with them. It's a matter that has resulted in hundreds of suits for damages. The plaintiff almost never wins. You always run into perjured testimony, but even with honest witnesses, it's almost impossible to prove a wilful invasion or negligence. In this instance, the company would be sure to claim that there was no trespass, that the cows were on the right of way. As for the damaged wagons and so forth, we have no case at all. We were occupying that land in defiance of the law."

"That don't sound right to me!" Teton growled. "You mean to tell us they can do as they please and we got to stand for it?"

"I don't mean to say anything of the sort," Britt contradicted vigorously. "If they stray off their right of way, molest anyone's livestock or damage property, we'll haul them up short. It doesn't set any better with me than it does with you to see them get away with a brutal, high-handed move like that, but when I see that the cards are stacked against us, I regard it as my duty to say so. Aside from losing Honeywell and old George, we haven't any reason to feel downhearted; we won more than we lost. Harvey Stock stopped me just before I left town. He's so completely disgusted with the way things are going that when I asked him why he didn't follow Tinsley's example and break away from Berdan and Logan, he said, 'I wish I could see my way clear to do it.' "

It was received with expressions of enthusiasm and optimism. When quiet was restored, he related his conversation with Stock. He had a keen sense of the dramatic and knew how to impress an audience. "As I told Tinsley," he concluded, "I hesitated about mentioning this. I don't believe in raising false hopes, but I feel so sure that we'll soon have 44 with us—and as Harvey Stock goes, so goes Jim Matthews—that I couldn't hold it back."

"What makes you think Berdan and Logan can't account satisfactorily for the money they've had turned over to 'em?" Teton called out.

Carter had foreseen the question. "I'll answer that as best I can. All of you are familiar with the scope of the water company's project—the high dam—the size of the main canal." With his listeners hanging on his words, he made them wait while he removed his nose glasses and polished them carefully with his handkerchief. It was one of his favorite courtroom tricks to heighten the importance of a statement. "You've wondered, as I have, what the company intends to do with all that water."

He glanced at Tinsley. "I don't want to steal your thunder, Clark. If you prefer to speak about this yourself—"

"No, go ahead," the tall man told him. He turned to Ria. "This is the matter I had in mind when I said there was something I thought the three of us should discuss. It's just a surmise; we haven't any evidence as yet to support it."

"That's true," the old attorney admitted. "Though, as of now, we have no evidence, circumstances are sometimes of such a nature that they cast a very convincing shadow. . . . My friends, Clark and I are of the opinion that Berdan and Logan have purchased a sizable block of cheap Government land, south and southeast of Steamboat Butte, with the intention of putting water on it."

It threw the meeting into an uproar. There were excited cries of "That's it!" "That's what they're up to!" Teton raised his voice above the babble to inquire if any effort had been made to get the facts in the matter from the U. S. Land Office. "I know the local office is closed, but that needn't stop us."

"At my suggestion, Britt got a letter off to Washington day before yesterday," Tinsley informed him. "I don't know how soon we can expect an answer."

"Ten days to two weeks," said Carter. "In the meantime, we'll just have to saw wood."

Teton was not satisfied. "That means puttin' all our eggs in one basket and sittin' around waitin' while they go on buildin' their dam and diggin' their canal." He turned to Tinsley. "Is that yore program? I figgered we'd git some action here this afternoon."

"I'll be glad to hear any suggestion you care to offer," Clark told him. "This is an open meeting. If anyone has anything to say, let him speak up."

There was no response, not even from Teton, but after grumbling to himself for a moment or two, he

said, "There ought to be sumthin' we kin do, 'stead of jest sittin' on our hunkers and lettin' the days go by. After the funeral tomorrow, suppose you take a ride into the Buckskins with me, Tinsley. And if you can still fork a bronc, Britt, you come with us. There's sumthin' I'd like to show you fellas."

"I'll be glad to," the tall man told him. And with a smile, he added, "I hope you're not planning to blow up the dam."

"Hell, no!" Teton snorted. "I don't even want to see it!"

After the meeting broke up, Tinsley found an opportunity for a few words alone with Ria. He felt that, behind the scenes, she had been busy in his behalf and that he largely owed his nomination and election to her.

"You're mistaken, Clark," she protested, when he tried to thank her. "It came as just as big a surprise to me as to you. It was Teton's doing. Under different circumstances it would be amusing, the way he barks at you and then follows your lead. What do you suppose he has in mind for tomorrow?"

Tinsley grinned. "That's just what I was about to ask you. He's dead serious about it, whatever it is, or he wouldn't have asked Britt to go up with us."

Ria said, "It may be important, but I believe Mr. Carter dropped the real bombshell, about Berdan and Logan buying desert land. I've seen that country so often, and yet it never occurred to me that it might figure in their scheming. . . . It was your idea, Clark?"

"Not exactly. You know Smoky Gallatin. He came up with it first. If they've bought in, down there, we'll have them on the run, even if they used their own money. There'll be an investigation, that's sure. If it can be proved that they embezzled company funds, it'll be their finish."

In a joint service, Dan Honeywell and George Shepherd were buried from the Episcopal church, early the following afternoon. The crowd was so large that only a small part of it could be accommodated within; the others stood about in the churchyard, standing with heads uncovered until the services were concluded. Britt Carter declared it to be such a turnout as Hays City had never seen in his time. "They've come from far and near," he remarked to Tinsley. "It must give Berdan and Logan something to think about."

They found Teton waiting for them in the yard. "No need of our goin' out to the cemetery," he told them. "There'll be more than enough without us. Git yore hosses and we'll slip out of town and head up the valley."

Whether he wanted to or not, Teton had at least a bird's-eye view of the dam. Operations there were going ahead on schedule. Off to the right, two steam shovels chugged and clanked in the excavation that was to be the main canal or mother ditch.

When the road reached the hills and began to pitch steeply, Teton turned in the saddle and spoke to Carter. "The goin's gittin' a little tough. You standin' it all right?"

"Don't worry about me," Britt returned banteringly. "If there was any occasion for it, I could ride you into the ground. . . . You might tell us where we're being taken."

"No place you ain't seen many times," Teton replied. "But you always saw it from down below, when you was whippin' the Sweetwater with a trout rod."

When they were as much as a mile and a half above the dam, he turned off the road and guided them up a shallow, brush-choked canyon. Climbing over an intervening saddle, they entered a second canyon, deeper

than the first and pinching out against a mountain wall, the lower fourth of it an immense rock fall.

Teton pulled up. "We'll blow the horses a minute," he said. "When we git up this slope, we'll be where we're goin'."

They were still some distance from the top, when the sound of rushing water reached them.

"We're coming out above the river, eh?" Tinsley observed.

"A couple hundred feet above it," Teton answered. "There's a wide, flat rimrock up there. You kin lean over the edge of it and spit in the river if you got a mind to."

They came out on the rimrock ten minutes later. A scene of rugged mountain grandeur unrolled before them, with the swiftly flowing Sweetwater, running white in spots, threading its way toward the valley.

"Reckon you know where you are, Britt," said Teton.

"Certainly! That's Hardscrabble Canyon coming in, off there to the left. I've hoofed it up Hardscrabble a hundred times and more. It's the only way you can reach this stretch of the river. It's impossible to get down from this side."

"It's beautiful," Tinsley remarked, "but you didn't bring us up here to have a look at the scenery, Teton. What was the idea?"

"Hardscrabble Canyon. . . . Britt, you tell him where it comes out into the valley."

"Why, about a mile below where they're building the dam," the attorney stated, not a little surprised at the strange request. "Come out with it and stop beating around the bush," he said, with a touch of annoyance. "What is it you're driving at?"

"You let me handle this my own way," Teton scolded. "Hardscrabble is as crooked as a snake's back. As the crow flies, it can't be more'n three and a half miles from

this spot to where it breaks into the valley, but I reckon it takes it a good six miles to git there. Right?"

"About that," Carter agreed.

"And there ain't a break in it—no side canyons—jest steep walls till it comes out of the hills. Am I right again?"

"Confound it, you know you are!"

"Then, gentlemen, I want you to take a good look down there, where the river flows past the portal of the canyon. Ain't it a fact that if the Sweetwater was backed up as much as ten feet it would flow into Hardscrabble?"

"Well!" the tall man exclaimed. "I'm beginning to get your drift. If the water level could be raised a few feet along here, the dam would be left high and dry. The Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association wouldn't have anything to sell but dust."

"It can be raised easy enough, Tinsley. Plant a charge or two in the right places and half this rimrock will slip into the river."

"No!" Britt Carter shook his head emphatically. "It's foolish to waste any thought on it; it's a criminal offense, and a serious one, to tamper with a flowing stream in this State without the express consent of the Legislature."

"Hellsfire, there could be an accident, couldn't there?" Teton burst out hotly. "This country is all open to entry for minin'. Suppose someone found a little gold and started a rush up here and a heavy blast or two went off at the same time. If a few hundred tons of rocks slid down into the river, that would be accidental, wouldn't it?"

"I'll have no part of it," Carter said flatly. "We couldn't get by with it. There isn't any gold up here."

"Can you prove that?" Teton snapped.

"Heavens, no, I don't suppose I can!" Britt turned his back on him and complained to Tinsley. "You can't

reason with the man. What he is proposing is preposterous."

"I don't know about that," the tall man demurred. "There are times when the only way you can beat skulduggery is to indulge in a little of it yourself."

He walked over to the edge of the rim and studied the wall. Frost had been at work there for centuries, leaving deep stringers of rotten quartz. Carter watched him narrowly, noted with dismay the serious consideration the tall man was giving the matter.

"It's like I said, ain't it?" Teton spoke up. "I could tote in enough giant powder on my back to do the job."

"Nature will take care of it by herself, give her time," said Tinsley. "Fifty to a hundred years. . . . I'm glad you brought us up, Teton. This is something to keep in mind."

"That's nonsense! Absolute nonsense, Clark!" Old Britt had seldom been so exercised. "We can win without turning to anything like this."

"I believe we can," Tinsley agreed. "But if everything else fails, we can turn to it as a last resort. You lawyers have an expression that fits the case—an accomplished fact is the expression, I think. If this wall goes down, the river will be turned, and that'll certainly be an accomplished fact that no one will ever change."

They found Hays City quiet on their return. Tinsley went on to the ranch. He was having supper with Martin, when someone rode into the yard at a furious clip and pulled up sharply. The next moment Ritchie Eaton stood in the doorway. "I just came from Grundy's Ford," he jerked out. "Bill Starr and a couple of his cronies have got Purdy Roberts cornered in the saloon. Purdy was drinking. When Starr came in, Purdy told him off, and Starr beat hell out of him. . . . I figured you'd like to know."

The tall man nodded, his lean face flat and sober. "I'm much obliged, Ritchie. . . . Henry, tell Red and Chuck to saddle up in a hurry. Get a fresh horse for me. I'm asking for chips and playing for keeps this time!"

14

THE RAMSHACKLE clapboard building that housed the combination grocery and saloon, and barn of similar vintage, its ridgepole sagging and its warped shingle roof so loose that it appeared to be ready to take off whenever the wind blew, comprised all there was of Grundy's Ford.

Jotham Grundy—known far and wide as Jot Grundy—was the second of his name to establish himself there, having fallen heir to the business when an uncle of his had departed this world.

It was a strange establishment Jot conducted, the grocery occupying one side of the building and the saloon the other, with a dividing wall in between. Access from one side to the other was had through a doorway, from which the door itself had long since been removed.

In others days, Grundy's Ford had been a stopping point for men moving to and from the Owyhee country. Of late, it had to depend on what local business there was, and it was not so brisk that Jot had any need of hiring an assistant. He was a loose jowled, obese man of tremendous stature, with the sagging cheeks and eye pouches of one far gone with dropsy. He shuffled back and forth from grocery to saloon and vice versa, puffing with the exertion and habitually muttering to himself. When it came to service, grocery customers ran a bad second to those who patronized the bar. In fact, it was not unusual for the former to wait on themselves and

call Jot in after they had set out on the counter the supplies they wanted.

This wasn't the first time that partisan strife had swirled about Jot, but though caught in the middle of it, he had always remained neutral, not, as he put it, because he didn't have feelin's. Barroom disputes were a commonplace. He wasn't averse to acting as arbiter—provided the dispute was between friends. Otherwise, he was satisfied to rest his paunch on the bar and say nothing, with a gun, an immense hog leg, reposing within easy reach.

Tacked to the wall above the mirror on the back bar was a gaudily decorated sign, executed in an off moment by Sandy Glasheen, a Flying W puncher with artistic ambitions. It read:

NO SHOOTING
PERMITTED

Jot found nothing humorous about its admonition, even if it provoked the amusement of his patrons. For one reason or another, however, he had never been called on to prove that the sign meant what it said. There was a feeling in him this evening, however, that time was rapidly running out on him and his sign. As he moved back and forth behind the bar, with the heavy step of a pachyderm, his sagging, pear-shaped face looked heavier than ever in the yellow glow of the oil lamps.

Purdy Roberts lay huddled against the back wall of the saloon, helpless with whiskey as well as from the beating Starr had given him. He had managed to get to his feet several times, only to have Starr flatten him again and again. It had become a game with Bill.

Though Jot bore Starr no good will and, on the other hand, had a certain liking for Purdy, he had not at-

tempted to interfere. He had his 'feelin's' about it, but his role had always called for a strict neutrality and this appeared to be no time to introduce an innovation. Starr's two companions were strangers to Jot. Bill addressed one as Crocker and the other as Legrand. They were a hard-looking pair, and their speech was as tough as their looks. In as much as they were with Starr, he took it for granted that they were in the employ of the water company. Jot put them down for gunmen.

He caught the quick running of ponies. He had been expecting it. A minute or two later, three men walked into the saloon. He recognized Red Lucas and Chuck Hammer. He had never laid eyes on Tinsley, but he knew the tall man who entered with them was the boss of P Bench.

"Just what I thought," Jot muttered to himself. "The way young Eaton fanned it away from here, I knew he wasn't headed for home."

Bill Starr flicked a wicked glance at the newcomers and spoke a quick word to his companions. Taking a half step back from the bar and making sure he had elbow room, he waited, his right arm hanging free at his side. He was still facing the bar, watching Tinsley and his men in the mirror. He had taken a few drinks but they had not dulled his mental processes. This was a showdown, and he knew it.

Jot read Starr's intention easily enough; there'd be the quick slap of hand to holster, the fast draw, with the first slug on its way as he pivoted.

Tinsley and his punchers had stopped just inside the door. They came on again now. Jot was watching Starr closely and caught a tell-tale twitch of the man's mouth that said this was the moment.

Jot was leaning over the bar then, and his hog leg of a gun was in his fist. "Not in here, Bill," he said in a tense, quiet way quite foreign to his usual bull-like

rumbling. "The sign means what it says. And that goes for the rest of you. If there's any shootin' in here, I'll do it."

Somehow, Starr realized that Jot meant it. It was incredible; nobody had ever paid any attention to the fat man, he least of all. A moment before, he had been sure of himself, knew exactly what he wanted to do. Now, suddenly, he wasn't certain of anything.

P Bench had stopped again, a dozen feet away. At the back of the saloon Purdy seemed to recognize them. Clutching at the wall, he tried to get to his feet. Red started for him.

"Wait," Tinsley snapped. And to the three men at the bar, he rapped, "Turn around!"

Crocker and Legrand obliged. Starr didn't move.

Chuck carried an eighteen-foot stock whip coiled over his shoulder. The tall man reached for it and with a flick of his wrist made the preliminary forward cast, the whip running out its full length on the floor. With an expertness born of years of learning how to handle the long whip, he snapped it over his shoulder in a powerful back-cast, the leaden popper cracking with a gun-like report. The whip flashed out and whistled around Starr's neck and tightened there. Tinsley tugged as though he had a rope in his hands. It yanked Bill away from the bar so unexpectedly that his feet got tangled and he crashed to the floor. He lay there a moment, with Jot watching him as closely as Tinsley was. Both saw Starr's hand slipping toward his gun.

"Better not, Bill," Jot said, with a rare absence of feeling. 'You'd never live to get it out of the leather. The man told you to turn around. You shoulda done it."

Starr reached for the end of the whip and uncoiled it from his neck. With a savage snarl on his lips, he heaved himself to his feet. Tinsley snaked the whip

away and laid it out, ready to use it again if necessary. "You two," he said to Crocker and Legrand, "do you want to pull out of here while the going is still good—or what?"

The pair exchanged a glance. Neither felt under any compulsion to succor Bill Starr—not in the present circumstances, at least. Without saying a word, they moved to the door.

"Follow them out, Red," the tall man ordered, "and put your gun on them, just in case they change their minds about anything." To Jot, he said, "I've got a score to settle with this man, Grundy. See that he drops his gun-belt. I'll do the same."

Jot nodded, finding the tall man's proposal an entirely satisfactory solution. "You heard what he said, Bill. Come on, unbuckle!"

"Certainly!" was Starr's growling response. He fancied himself as a rough and tumble man with his fists. The only authority he had ever exercised over the Double Diamond crew was due to his using his fists. It explained why it was a bad crew and why no man stayed with the brand any longer than it took him to catch on somewhere else. Not for a moment did he doubt his ability to take Tinsley. The prospect of beating that hated face to a pulp and working the tall man over until he lay helpless on the floor filled him with an eagerness that made his muscles swell. Unbuckling his belt, he wrapped the loose ends around the holster and tossed the gun-weighted bundle to Jot. Hunched over, he rolled back his shoulders and set his feet for the first rush.

Tinsley eyed him coolly and made him wait, hoping thus to so infuriate him that he would throw caution to the winds and come in swinging recklessly. The ruse was effective. Exasperation flowed into the man's eyes. Suddenly, then, Jot had both their guns.

Outside, horses were put in motion. The sound of their running receded rapidly. Chuck Hammer came to the saloon door and stood there, surprised and pleased that he hadn't missed anything. He was just in time. Starr charged savagely, head lowered, his arms wide and cocked, ready to take a blow if he could drive Tinsley back and pin him against the wall that separated saloon from grocery. With a grunt of satisfaction, he saw the latter apparently set himself to meet that rush. At the last moment, without betraying any sign of his intention, the tall man stepped aside neatly and clipped him as he drove past.

Starr fetched up against the wall with a violent thud that knocked a stack of tin pans off a shelf on the opposite side of the wall. And now the tables were turned and it was the foreman who was pinned there. Even as he swung around, Tinsley brought a long, whistling right hand up fom his knees that drove Bill's head against the wall with a sickening impact. Blood spurted from his split lips.

Starr's senses were befogged. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Again a long, slashing right caught him. Tinsley expected to see him go down, but Starr weathered that blow and a third that was just as damaging. There was tough fiber in the man and Tinsley began to realize it. He jabbed, cut and hammered that rawboned face at will for a few moments, without drawing a return blow. Bill's right eye had begun to close and his mouth was a swollen, pulpy mess. Otherwise, that savage flurry seemed to have no noticeable effect on him. It was as though he were inviting the tall man to do his worst.

Actually, Starr was only biding his time, waiting for overconfidence to make Tinsley careless. When he saw his chance, he brought his elbows back against the wall and catapulted away from it. It carried him in close and Tinsley couldn't get away from a piston-like right,

fired straight from the shoulder and not traveling over a dozen inches. A second time and a third that iron fist crashed into his jaw and turned his legs to rubber, driving him up against the bar. His head struck the front of it as he went down, splitting the flimsy panel as though someone had used an ax on it. With thunder roaring in his brain, he saw boots striding toward him. Somehow, he got to his knees. Knowing all too well that in another moment Starr would be kicking him into unconsciousness, he lunged at the man's legs, got his arms around them, forced them together and spilled Bill to the floor.

Only the sound of their heavy, spasmodic breathing broke the silence that gripped the room. The two of them knelt there on hands and knees for a long moment, regarding each other with wolfish attention. Until his legs had been pulled out from under him Starr thought it was all over; that he could apply the finishing touches at his pleasure. His right eye was now completely closed. With the other, he glared at the tall man with baffled rage. Without attempting to rise, he lunged at Tinsley. The latter crawled backward just in time to escape the clutching fingers that grazed his throat. Throwing up a hand, he caught the bar railing and pulled himself to his feet.

Red groaned as he saw him totter. "Don't let him catch up with you, Boss!" he cried. "You're groggy! Keep on the move till you shake it off!"

It was excellent advice. Bill was up. When he came boring in, Tinsley retreated. For the full space of a minute, he backed away, circling around the room. His vision was clearing and strength flowing back to him. Light, flicking jabs with his left kept Starr off balance. Then, without warning, Tinsley was no longer retreating. Starr slammed at his chin. The tall man saw it coming. He got under it and lifted the big fellow to his

toes with a bone crunching blow beneath the heart. With a whooshing sound, the breath rushed out of Bill, and he stood there flat-footed, his lungs heaving.

Tinsley's reflexes were sharp again. Having discovered how to hurt the Double Diamond man, he moved around him, feinted him into another opening and let him have it again. Soon, Bill could no longer untrack himself. The tall man began moving around him like a cooper working on a barrel. When Bill tried to protect his body, the attack shifted to his head, long, punishing rights that began to make his knees buckle. His resistance became a feeble thing. Though he was out on his feet, he continued to swing wildly. Tinsley felt a grazing hand rip across his injured cheekbone and reopen that old cut. It whipped up a new fury in him and he measured Starr for a knockout. Putting everything he had into a final blow, he caught him below the jaw, its crushing impact snapping the foreman's head back and glazing his eyes. All the stiffness went out of him. With a weary gasp, he crumpled up like the proverbial empty bag and crashed to the floor, unconscious.

Red and Chuck ran up, garrulous and excited. Tinsley pointed to Purdy. "Get him," he said. "Set him in his saddle and we'll pull away."

He walked to the bar and Jot handed him his gunbelt, and said, "Bill had this comin' to him a long time, Tinsley. You got two strikes on him now. It'll take gunsmoke to put over the third one."

The tall man nodded. "I'm obliged to you, Grundy—both for the favor and the advice."

"I reckon you know he ain't ramroddin' Double Diamond no more."

"No, I didn't know—"

"Wal, he ain't," Jot growled. "He's workin' for the water company—goin' to boss some gents they're bringin' in from outside. I reckon the pair you saw with him

just now was the first to show up. . . . If you think my advice is good, Tinsley, look behind you once in a while when you ride."

Carrying Purdy, they left the ford. A horseman detached himself from the shadows as they reached the P Bench road. It was Ritchie. He had waited there. "Did you take him, Tinsley?" he jerked out anxiously.

"I took him," Clark muttered. "Do you have to run to Ria with this?"

"Why not?" the youngster demanded. "I can tell her you licked him—and that'll be all right with her."

15

TINSLEY pretended not to be aware of his increased popularity with his P Bench crew, following his successful encounter with Bill Starr. Old Smoky whistled merrily as he went about his work. Down at the bunkhouse, there was further evidence of high spirits. The hot days of midsummer were at hand. The work slacked off as usual. Henry Martin was hard put to keep the men busy, going so far as to order a perfectly serviceable corral pulled down and a new one built to replace it. Likewise, he had the fence along the river given a thorough overhauling. Work for work's sake was a cardinal virtue with him, and he often said that idleness had ruined more men than women and whiskey.

True to Britt Carter's prediction, the Hays City *Dispatch* began to take a less favorable attitude toward the water company. Editorially, it decried the fact that armed thugs had been brought in to police the right of way.

By way of his friend Steve Jennings, Red was able to confirm Jot Grundy's statement that Bill Starr had outlived his usefulness as Nip Logan's foreman. "Runnin' him into the river, Boss, put the skids under him, just as you said," Red observed. "He couldn't git nothin' done on the spread after that."

A week passed. Tinsley saw Ria several times. The surveyors were running their lines for the canal across the Eaton ranch. Elena invited him to dinner Sunday evening. He and Ria sat on the gallery later. "I realize

it's too early to expect news from Washington," she said, "but it's discouraging to see the days go by like this and just stand by, marking time. Father hasn't been out on our range since the surveyors came across our line. I try to cheer him up. It doesn't help."

"I know," Clark said. "When Ritchie was over to P Bench yesterday, he mentioned it. I haven't heard anything further from Harvey Stock, neither has Britt. I imagine if Stock and Matthews had been able to force a meeting of the directors, we'd have heard about it. I could go to see them, but Britt advises me not to; he thinks we'll do a lot better if we wait for them to come to us."

"I think he's right, Clark. . . . Did you say anything to Ritchie about the trip you and Mr. Carter made up the river with Teton?"

"Not a word. He was fishing around, but I didn't give him any satisfaction. Turning the river sounds like a fantastic idea, as I told you the other afternoon. But it can be done—not that I'd be for trying it unless we find ourselves in dire straits. If we are to keep it in mind and have any chance of getting away with it, there doesn't want to be any talk about it now—not even to Platt or Les. Tell them, and we'll be obligated to tell the others. Someone would let a word slip and the cat would be out of the bag."

He drove into town the next day with Martin. While his foreman was busy with errands connected with the ranch, he spent a few minutes with Carter. The latter assured him that the moment he had news for him, he would come to P Bench.

On the street Tinsley encountered Buck Ruxton. "It didn't take you long to get to the top of the heap," said Buck. "I didn't figure it would. . . . Have you seen the plug-uglies the company's brought in?"

"I saw two of them."

"Then you know they're the usual type of saloon gladiators whose guns are for hire. I reckon they're be-in' paid fifteen to twenty dollars a day. With things quiet and goin' the company's way, it seems a little strange that Berdan and Nip would go to that expense. How do you explain it?"

"Why—it seems pretty obvious," the tall man replied, showing some surprise at the question. "I suppose the company is afraid we may try to blow up the dam or blast their steam shovels. The cowboys Berdan recruited for guards didn't do too good a job, so I suppose he's brought in professional gunmen."

The sheriff shook his head. "That ain't the only reason, Tinsley. They could be here to convince certain other parties—not connected with your organization—that it won't be healthy for them to jump the reservation and kick up a ruckus."

It pulled Tinsley up sharply. "You mean Stock and Matthews, of Bar Cross?"

"Possibly. I was thinkin' more particularly of Sam Grinell. He knows more than is good for him—if you get what I mean."

That was all Buck had to say. Tinsley nodded and said, "I think I know exactly what you mean."

Tinsley was out on the ranch, two days later, when Smoky came looking for him with word that Stock and Matthews were at the house. He went in at once. He had seen Matthews in town but was unacquainted with him. Stock introduced them and went on to mention his talk with Carter. "Did Britt say anything to you about it?"

"Yes, he did," Tinsley acknowledged.

"Well, we've seen Nip and Berdan and tried to get a meeting of the directors. We've just come from Double Diamond now. We didn't get any satisfaction at all. Britt thought we could force them to call a meeting, but it seems there's something in the by-laws that says

special meetings can be called only by the chairman of the board. Otherwise, there's just the semi-annual meetings. The next one is still two months off."

"And in the meantime, another installment will be due on the bonds."

"It sure will," Matthews agreed. "They won't get another dollar out of me unless they sue me for it. I told Berdan that this morning. If this thing weren't a swindle, why would they stall like this about giving us an accounting?"

The tall man smiled mirthlessly. "I'm glad you gentlemen have got your eyes open at last. It makes me feel a little better to know that my father wasn't the only one who was roped in. I wish I could follow your lead and tell them they won't get another dollar out of me without a lawsuit. But I feel honor bound to meet the payments. Logan's chairman of the board. What excuse did he give for putting you off?"

"That he was too busy to call a meeting and that there was no need for one at the present time," Matthews answered. "Things got pretty hot. Nip warned us if we tried to do any snooping, we'd regret it. That didn't scare us. I told him to his face he was a dirty crook. What brought us over this afternoon is this: you're a stockholder and so are all the members of your association. If Harve and I give you proxies to vote our stock, that'll give you a majority. You can go into court and compel the company to show cause why an accounting shouldn't be made."

"We'll pay our share of the legal expense," Stock put in. "Better still, we'll join up with your crowd, if we're welcome to it."

The tall man didn't try to dissemble his satisfaction. "You'll be welcome," he assured them. "I don't mind telling you that we've already discussed the possibility of having you lined up with us. We've been waiting a

week and more for some important news. We felt if it turned out to be what we expect that you'd be sure to break with Berdan and Logan. We should be hearing any time now. As for getting the company to open its books, I don't know what to say. Between us, we could surely vote a majority of the stock. Before we do anything, I think we should consult Britt."

That was agreeable to his visitors and they arranged to meet in town at ten the next morning. They had sat there for some time discussing their mutual problems, when Britt Carter's familiar buggy rolled into the yard. The white-haired lawyer had Ria with him. "Britt may be bringing the news I mentioned," Tinsley told his guests, who got up to leave. "I want you to stay."

He stepped out to meet Ria and Britt. There was an air of pleased excitement about them.

"I've got good news for you, Clark!" the old gentleman exclaimed.

"And I've got news for you," the tall man informed them. "Stock and Matthews are here. They're coming in with us."

Jim Matthews greeted Ria with tender affection. It was his son who had been lost in action in the Philippines. He had never fully recovered from that blow. "I'm glad we can meet as friends again, Ria; we've missed you at Bar Cross. I saw this thing one way and you and your folks another. It was my mistake."

"It makes me happy, too," she said, with a fond smile. "Having you and Mr. Stock on our side will be a wonderful tonic for all of us."

Tinsley offered Britt a chair, which the latter refused, saying, "I'm not going to sit down until I've got this off my chest." He tapped the letter he held in his hand. "It's just about what we expected." He adjusted his nose glasses and was about to begin reading the letter, when

he stopped and glanced at Clark. "Have you said anything to Harve and Jim about this?"

"No."

"Then I'd better explain." With his usual conciseness, he enlightened them and proceeded to read the letter he had just received from Washington. On May 28th, it said, 75 sections of the wasteland in question had been sold to a George Rickert, post office address, Winnemucca, Nevada.

Tinsley was the first to comment. "There it is! This is what they were after from the start!" His voice was harsh and accusing. His glance ran from one to the other. "Is there any question in your minds that this George Rickert is a dummy buyer, set up by Logan and Berdan to cover their tracks?"

Out of his amazement, Harve Stock said, "He's acting for them—no doubt about it. Who else would be interested?"

"That's a chunk of land!" Matthews declared. "Forty-eight thousand acres. They've sunk sixty thousand dollars in it. We can get a line on this fellow Rickert, can't we?"

"Very easily, I believe," Carter told him. "I'm well acquainted in Winnemucca. I've been trying to recall the name ever since I read the letter. I can't place him. I'll go down on the morning train and see what I can learn. If you can arrange it, Ria, I wish you'd go with me. I know you have friends there. You may be able to help me. We won't be gone more than a day or two."

"I'll be glad to go," she said. "In the meantime, what about letting Teton and the others know we've had word?"

"I have no objection to it if it's done on the promise of strict secrecy. We don't want news of what we're doing to run ahead of us. Suppose you attend to it, Clark."

Britt and Ria left the next morning and were back

in Hays City on the afternoon of the second day. They went directly to the Eaton ranch and gave Ritchie the responsibility of calling the members of the new association to a meeting there that evening.

Tinsley was the first to arrive. Before they had an opportunity to say a word, he sensed that their mission had been successful.

"I won't keep you waiting," Britt told him. "Thanks to Ria, we discovered that George Rickert is Mrs. Berdan's cousin. He's the freight agent for the Nevada and Idaho Railroad and has always been in very modest circumstances. It was apparent at once that he couldn't possibly have had anything like sixty thousand dollars to invest in Government land."

"That should clinch it," Tinsley declared enthusiastically. "What did he have to say?"

"I couldn't get anything out of him. He had been well coached. You can't compel a man to explain how he gets his money unless criminal proceedings have been instituted against him. I've been well acquainted with Bob Sondergaard, the D.A. down there, for years. I told Bob why I was in town. As a favor to me, he called Rickert in and questioned him. Between the two of us, we finally got him snarled up in his story and got the truth out of him. He admitted he had purchased the land for Berdan and though he still held the deed for it, he had given Win an assignment of all rights."

"What about Logan?" Tinsley asked. "Didn't his name come into it?"

"Not once; all of Rickert's dealings were with Berdan. He came to Hays City. Saw MacDonough, at the land office, arranged for the sections he wanted to buy and then went to the bank and got the cash from Berdan."

"That was the most damaging fact of all," Ria interjected. "Handling a transaction that large in cash, I

mean. They weren't risking a check, which could be traced."

"I tried to make him admit that MacDonough was involved," the lawyer continued. "He denied it to the end. But I know there was some connivance; you couldn't walk into MacDonough's office and buy that amount of land, which you had never seen, without arousing his curiosity, if not his suspicions. That's beside the point, however. The fact that MacDonough kept the transaction secret is enough to condemn him. You spoke of Logan. Rickert had no reason to contact him; Berdan acted for the two of them. That was much safer. When we have evidence enough to proceed against them, we'll find both equally guilty."

"More evidence?" The tall man's tone was on the incredulous side. "Haven't you evidence enough now?"

The old attorney smiled patiently. "Evidence to prove that the company is being operated to serve an ulterior purpose. I'd go so far as to say we could take the matter to the state supreme court, get an injunction and eventually have the charter set aside and the corporation ordered dissolved. But that will take time. We'll accomplish all that, and more too, and much sooner, if we can prove there was an embezzlement of company funds. That's what we want, and we can't afford to move slowly; you can be sure that Rickert will get in touch with Win immediately. Nip and Berdan will realize at once what we're digging at."

Britt got up and walked the length of the gallery and back in serious meditation. He stopped in front of Tinsley and Ria and propounded a surprise question. "Do you know who holds the key to this whole situation? Well, I'll tell you; Sam Grinell! He was elected to the board of directors as a sop to the small ranching interests. For some reason, he's fallen out with Berdan and Logan. How deep the feeling is, I don't know; but if he

could be induced to join Stock and Matthews in petitioning the court to order a meeting of the board, that would give us a majority. If we have to, we can go through with it; we have evidence enough to prove gross irregularities. But I don't believe it would get that far; I think the threat of it would force Logan to call a meeting. Certainly he prefers taking his chances with the board members to having certified accountants going over the books."

"That sounds better to me than the action Mr. Stock suggested, at P Bench the other afternoon," Ria stated, after considering it for a moment or two. "Of course, there's a big if in it. Mr. Stock and Mr. Matthews will be here soon. They'd be the ones to approach Grinell."

Excitement ran high that evening at the Eatons. Stock and Matthews promptly agreed to see Grinell. Stock was not at all optimistic about what they could accomplish. Matthews, on the other hand, was sure that Grinell could be persuaded. "You don't know the man as well as I do," he said. "He's got something in his craw against Nip Logan. If he thinks this will hurt Nip, he'll go for it."

"You couldn't do better than to see him yet tonight," Britt told them. "Sound him out. If he's agreeable, the three of you be at my office early in the morning. I haven't any intention of going into court tomorrow, but I want your signatures early enough to permit me to see Del Robinson at the *Dispatch* in time to catch the evening paper. When an account of the action we are about to take is published, something should crack somewhere. I'll give Logan twenty-four hours to make up his mind and no more."

By arrangement, Tinsley stopped at the Eatons, late the following morning, and picked up Ria. Together, they rode into town. Great as their interest was in Grinell's decision, they had timed their arrival at Britt's

office late enough not to intrude on that meeting. The old gentleman bounced out of his chair as they opened the door and wrung their hands excitedly. "It worked!" he exclaimed happily. "Grinell took the bait like a hungry trout. I won't try to repeat what he had to say about Nip Logan, but it had plenty of sulphur in it."

"You've seen Robinson, at the newspaper?" Clark inquired.

"I sure have! You'll see the story on the front page this evening. I feel so good about this that I'm going to invite the two of you to lunch at the hotel."

They sat there talking over the developments for a few minutes. As they were about to leave the office, Teton and Carson Platt walked in.

"By grab, we couldn't stand the suspense of not knowin' what was goin' on," Teton declared. "One of my punchers said he saw Sam Grinell headin' for town this mornin'. That was too much fer me. I rode over to Carse's place and we decided to come in and git the news. . . . How did it go?"

"All our way," Britt told him. "I've got Grinell's signature."

"What do you know about that?" Teton burst out. "So Sam came through! I kin forgive him a lot fer that!"

Carson Platt, with his usual reserve, said simply, "We ought to be able to smoke them out now."

The story that appeared in the *Dispatch* that evening created less than a sensation, as far as the general public was concerned. In certain quarters, however, it had a dramatic effect. Tom Lamb, the company's attorney, hurried to the bank as soon as he read the article. It was after banking hours. Not finding Berdan there, he went to Berdan's home only to be told that Win had just left for Double Diamond. Lamb did not feel called on to follow him. He knew Berdan and Logan had never taken him into full confidence; and he had a lively sus-

picion that the affairs of the company would not stand inspection. His regret was that he was the attorney of record for the Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association.

At P Bench, next morning, Tinsley was walking down the yard with Martin, when a woman dashed into the yard on horseback, her skirts flying and her manner hysterical. "Henry, who is this?" he asked at once.

"Sam Grinell's wife! I can't imagine what she's doing here!"

A thought flashed through Tinsley's mind and tightened his mouth. Back to him came what Buck Ruxton had said about the purpose of the company's gunmen not being limited to guarding the dam and right of way. He hurried toward Mrs. Grinell.

"You're Tinsley, ain't you?" she demanded. And when he said yes, she said, "You got to do somethin'—and quick! Sam signed them papers yesterday, and now they're goin' to kill him!"

Martin came up. Between them, Clark and he finally got a coherent story from her. "We'd just finished breakfast, when Sam saw a bunch of men movin' up to the house. He said right away, 'They're comin' to git me!' He grabbed his rifle and a sack of ca'tridges and lit out the back door. He had a hoss standin' there. He yelled at me to git over here and tell you. They didn't see him go; he kept the house and barn between him and them. About five minutes later, they was at the house. Bill Starr and I reckon ten others. They asked for Sam. I told 'em he wa'n't there, but they came in and went through the place, tearin' things up, slappin' the children around. They tried to make me tell 'em where Sam was. I wouldn't do it. Then they went after the little boy. Starr used a quirt on him. I stood it as long as I could and then I told 'em Sam was hidin' out somewheres in the Mustang Hills."

"What do you make of it, Clark?" Martin rapped.

"It's Logan's way of making sure that we don't have a majority on the board! . . . Mrs. Grinell—do you know where we can find Sam?"

"Antelope Rocks. You might not know the place, but Henry does."

Martin nodded. "In the hills above Teton's place."

"Ring the bell," the tall man told him. "Call up the whole crew. Send word to Teton. I'll get out some rifles and cartridges." Martin hurried off. To Mrs. Grinell, Tinsley said, "You better turn around and go home. We'll get Sam out of this jackpot. I'll send Smoky back with you. He's crippled, but he still knows how to pump a gun."

When P Bench swept into the Flying W yard they found Teton and his crew ready to ride. "They ain't run him down yit, Tinsley," Teton declared. "If there was shootin' up at the rocks, we'd hear it!"

"Maybe the wind—" Martin started to suggest.

"No!" the tall man interjected. "Listen! That's gunfire now!"

The sound was unmistakable.

"Let's go!" growled Teton. "Sam Grinell dead won't be worth a nickel to us!"

With Tinsley riding at his side, he led the way into the higher hills. The scrub timber thinned and was left behind. Ahead of them, gunfire swelled intermittently and then fell off to only an occasional shot. The pattern of that shooting said plainly enough that Starr and his gang had Grinell cornered.

Teton pointed out a nest of rocks skylined at the crest of the hills. "That's where they are!" he called across to Clark. "They're down in among them rocks! If Sam's forted up above that bunch, he kin stave 'em off till we move in. . . . Send word back to spread out! We'll throw a circle around the rocks!"

Tinsley and Martin swung off to the right with P Bench; Flying W moved around to the left. Starr and his gunmen were on the far side of the crest, trying to move in on Grinell from that direction, leaving the western slope open in the hope that he would break and try to make a run for it. When the two ends of the circle that was being thrown around them poured over the summit, they were quick to realize what was happening. The firing ceased abruptly. "Debating whether to take to their horses and try to get through before the jaws of the circle close on them," Martin called to Tinsley. The tall man nodded; the same thought had occurred to him. Rifles began cracking again. Furiously now. It left no doubt as to Starr's decision.

Tinsley, leading P Bench, met Teton. The circle had closed. "We got 'em trapped!" the old man screeched. "Leave the hosses and move in on hands and knees! We're shore goin' to give 'em hell now!"

The years had rolled off him and his faded eyes were ablaze with excitement. Presently, Flying W and P Bench guns began to speak. And now Starr found himself in an unforeseen predicament. To meet the enemy below, he and his men had to expose themselves to Grinell's deliberate fire from above. He was only one man, but they were like sitting ducks on a pond whenever they showed themselves. He knocked over two of them. Teton saw them go down. He whipped off his hat and let out a wild, piercing whoop.

"Get down!" Tinsley yelled at him.

Before Teton could move, a slug ricochetted off a boulder and slapped into him. "You all right?" Tinsley cried, as he saw him drop. "Jest a scratch!" was the flinty answer. "You and a couple of yore boys move over this way! Their hosses are in this pocket! Stampede 'em! We'll settle with these skunks right here in the rocks!"

The fight moved in among the boulders and outcrop-

pings. Grinell could no longer find a fair target. Starr's men tried to work down the eastern slope, gave it up and tried the other side. They were turned back and made another attempt to work through the sector where Tinsley, Martin and several P Bench men were closing in. The tall man peered over a boulder, found Crocker, who had been with Starr on the night of the fight at Grundy's Ford, on the other side. In the moment that was his, he felled the man with his rifle barrel. That was the pattern of the fighting now; you crawled around a protecting ledge or upthrust outcropping, not knowing who you would find waiting there. Rifles were no longer of any use; the action was too fast, the range too close. Stout Chuck Hammer crawled past Tinsley, his right arm blood-covered and useless. "Get below, and stay there, Chuck," Tinsley told him. "This will be all over in a few minutes."

Flying W had had two men put out of the fight, neither seriously injured. Starr's force had dwindled to seven, including himself. Their situation was growing desperate; their horses had been run off and the area in which they could move was rapidly narrowing. With his gun empty, Bill moved in between two ridges of granite and found himself in a narrow passage, twenty feet long. He was in the act of reloading, when Tinsley appeared at the other end.

Their surprise was mutual. They froze where they were for a moment, as rigid as statues, horror on Bill Starr's rocky face and a glassy, implacable hatred burning in his pinched eyes. That moment passed, and he locked his gun. It was a purely reflex action of which he was not conscious. He couldn't understand this spell that had been put on him. Around them, the fighting continued. The air was sharp with the acrid tang of powder fumes. He wasn't aware of those things; there was Tinsley at the other end of the passage, poised,

waiting. It, and it alone, filled his mind. A few feet away, a wounded man screamed. Somehow, it snapped Starr's trance. He squeezed the trigger; fired a second time and a third. He used his gun the way he used his fists—wildly, angrily. The coolness and detachment that give a man command of himself in a pinch were not his; he had to rush in headlong, sweep everything before him. He paid for it now. Tinsley's gun flamed, and an astonished look spread over Bill's rocky face. He seemed to glance at his gun and finding it suddenly too heavy let it slip from his fingers. The rock wall was close. He sought to brace himself against it, but life was gone and he fell forward on his face and lay still.

"Boss, why did you wait like that?" It was Red, and he was sharply scolding. "He coulda knocked you off easy as nothin'—all the time you gave him!"

"He was a fool," the tall man muttered. "He died the way he lived—a stupid, senseless brute." Clark glanced at Red then. "Where did you come from?"

"It's all over. The rest have given up. Teton's marchin' them out in the open."

"And Grinell—what about him?"

"He's okay."

Word spread quickly among Flying W and P Bench that Starr had been killed. Not a man among them but knew him. A few went over to where the body lay. Grinell didn't bother to go with them. "It's a good riddance of bad rubbish," he told Tinsley, "The wife told you where to look for me, I understand. I reckon they'd have rubbed me out if you fellas hadn't got here. This was Logan's doin'. I'll see that pot-bellied wolf in hell for it, too!"

Teton was in time to hear him. "If you feel that way, Sam, why don't you pull the rug out from under him? You know dang well he bribed you to vote his way."

"Sure he did! Him and Berdan give me my choice of

bein' turned off my ranch—I was a year behind on mortgage interest—or votin' their way and havin' the place free and clear. I'd carried over all my hay. I was strapped for cash. How could I do anythin' but take their dirty money?"

"Wal, they paid you," Teton declared impatiently. "What was the rub?"

"The hay! The only reason it was burned was because I'd lined up with them. I figgered they owed me a thousand dollars. I might have got it out of Berdan, but Logan told me to go plumb to hell."

"Sam—are you willing to put all that you've said in the form of an affidavit?" Tinsley asked.

"You bet I am! After what they pulled on me this mornin', there ain't nothin' I won't do to git square with 'em!"

"All right," said Tinsley. "You ride to town with Teton and me this afternoon. We'll see Britt."

Teton and he stepped aside and discussed what was to be done with the six men they had rounded up. It did not take them long to reach an agreement, after which Tinsley walked over to the prisoners. "The six of you are able to ride," he told them. "We've got your horses. We'll put you on them, and you'll leave this country, and you'll do it now; there won't be any going back to get your gear or collect your wages." He pointed to the east. "Somewhere over there you'll hit the Owyhee. When you do, just keep on going. We'll take your wounded into town and turn them over to the sheriff. They'll get proper medical attention. If that all's clear to you, get moving."

16

So MUCH had happened recently that Hays City's appetite for excitement was becoming a little jaded and it fancied it could take in stride anything that came up. That was disproven when the dead and wounded were brought in from the fight at Antelope Rocks and the news of the attack on Grinell and the killing of Bill Starr swept over town. That was only the beginning for what the next twenty-four hours were to bring, with young Vince McDermitt, Hays City's able and politically ambitious district attorney, playing a leading role.

Vince's chief concern was to find himself on the winning side, whatever the issue. Having a flexible conscience, he had not found that too difficult to date. He had supported Win Berdan and old Nip only because he believed they would be able to crush whatever opposition might materialize. Things had happened in the past two weeks, however, to convince him he had guessed wrong and was about to be caught off base. When Britt brought Sam Grinell in and the latter made a sworn statement regarding the method used to get his vote, Vince saw his opportunity. He went before Judge Littleton and asked for and got a temporary injunction against the company, halting all work. That was only the first bomb. Next, he exploded the purchase of the seventy-five sections of Government land and charged fraudulent manipulation of company funds. Again, he asked for and got an order impounding the company's books.

Tinsley had been in and out of Britt Carter's office all afternoon. He sat there now, a copy of the evening's *Dispatch* on his knees, its screaming headlines engraved on his mind.

"You look a bit bewildered," the old lawyer remarked.

"I am," Clark admitted. "I can't believe this is the end—it came so quickly."

"Well, it is the end; the Sweetwater Power and Water Users' Association is finished. Now is the time to get the proxies of the stockholders. As soon as we have them, I'll go to Carson City and see the attorney-general. He'll have to ask the state supreme court to revoke the charter and order the company dissolved. That'll set the stage for an investigation of the company's books. It will be the finishing touch as far as Logan and Berdan are concerned. You and the other bondholders are going to be caught in the wreckage, of course. You'll get some money back, but only to the extent of whatever embezzlement can be proved. Berdan has some property and Logan owns Double Diamond. Those properties can be attached. Otherwise, the only company assets I can see are a half-finished dam and a useless canal."

"We can stand whatever we lose. We'll have our natural water rights returned, and that's what we were fighting for." The tall man tossed the newspaper on the desk and was silent for a moment. "What about Berdan and Logan, Britt? Will McDermitt issue warrants for their arrest?"

"I don't believe he will. He's gone about as far as he dares for the present. You can't charge embezzlement until you have proof of it, and only an accounting will produce that evidence."

The windows were open. Sounds of excitement on the street drifted up to them. Tinsley went to the window. Buck Ruxton was hurrying past in the direction of the bank, as many others were doing.

"What is it, Buck?" Tinsley called down.

"Win Berdan! He's shot and killed himself!"

The tall man turned from the window. "Did you hear that, Britt?"

Carter nodded soberly. "He knew what was coming and he couldn't face it. Berdan was guilty, or he wouldn't have taken that way out. He was a shrewd man, and an honorable one, until he let his greed run away with him." He shook his head regretfully. "This will be a day we'll long remember."

One afternoon, several days later, Ritchie Eaton called upstairs to Ria. "The president of the Sweetwater Stockmen's Association is coming up the drive! Shall I inform him that the secretary and treasurer will be down directly?"

"You might tell him to bring his stock whip the next time he calls and give you a taste of it," Ria answered.

Ritchie laughed. It wasn't often that his teasing drew her fire. Tinsley had become a frequent visitor at the Eatons'. Ritchie knew it wasn't business that brought him so often.

This afternoon, she and the tall man rode down the river road, with no particular destination in mind. Tom Lamb had been at P Bench that morning in Logan's behalf. Tinsley had told her what Lamb had had to say.

"How do you feel about it?" she asked.

"It'll be all right with me if Logan makes full restitution of whatever sum he and Berdan took out of the company funds to buy that land. It wouldn't make me any happier to send him to prison. I told Lamb I'd speak to Stock and the other bondholders. I believe they'll agree not to press the charge."

"I'd expect you to feel that way about it," she told him. "You're generous, Clark."

He smiled at the compliment. "I don't know how

generous I am, but I can't see any point in keeping old grudges alive. We've got a half-finished dam on our hands. I'd like to see it put to use. It's high enough to back up all the water the valley needs without lowering the river an inch. Some ditches can be dug without going to too much expense. It'll accomplish all that my father and Matthews and Stock and so many others hoped to get out of the old company. I don't believe even Teton could object to that."

They passed Grundy's Ford and continued on for another mile. The river narrowed there and plunged down a narrow chute, the water boiling white and tumultuous. They got down and sat on the bank, watching its wild rushing.

Strangely, they found very little to say to each other. It was enough for Tinsley to feel her nearness and catch the warm glow of her dark eyes. With an indirection that he seldom employed, he said, "You and Ritchie have been to P Bench. When was your mother there last?"

"She's never been there, Clark. What makes you ask?"

"It's less than three miles from your place to the P Bench house. Don't you suppose she could find the way?"

Ria laughed softly, not understanding him. "Do you mean—could she bring herself to do it after all these years?"

"Yes—"

Ria smiled as she looked away. "I don't know," she murmured. "You have a way with her, Clark. Perhaps all she needs is a good excuse."

"If you married me—that would be excuse enough, wouldn't it?"

"Married you?" she exclaimed. Her chin lifted with all the pride that was in her. "Are you so sure I would?"

"No," he said soberly, no longer smiling. "How could

I be sure—knowing it's so much better than I deserve." He caught her hands and held them with a growing pressure. "If I haven't spoken before, Ria, it was only because I didn't think it was a time for it. But when I saw you that first morning in Hays City, I knew then that there never could be anyone else for me. You know I love you."

She turned to him, her lips parted and eager. "My darling," she whispered, "would it surprise you greatly if I were to tell you that I had that same thought that morning—you so tall and handsome and so sure of yourself?"

"Ria, do you mean it?" His arms closed about her and she raised her mouth for his kisses. Crushed in his embrace, she lay there. It was a moment of fulfillment for both.

Long afterward, he released her and sat there, humble with the wonder of her. He thought of the countless tomorrows they had ahead of them. He tried to speak but only murmured, "Maria!"

It was enough.

BEST SELLERS

GENUINE POCKET BOOK EDITIONS

Are there any you have missed?
Of the more than 700 POCKET BOOK *titles that have been published to date, these are some outstanding favorites:*

1. **Lost Horizon by James Hilton**
4. **Topper by Thorne Smith**
7. **Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë**
11. **The Good Earth by Pearl Buck**
14. **A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens**
104. **Nana by Emile Zola**
181. **The Pocket Cook Book by Elizabeth Woody**
421. **The Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary**
500. **The Sexual Side of Marriage by M. J. Exner, M.D.**
516. **Tales of the South Pacific by James Michener**
522. **Freud: His Dream and Sex Theories by Joseph Jastrow**
532. **Four Great Tragedies of Shakespeare**
533. **Four Great Comedies of Shakespeare**
550. **Mister Roberts by Thomas Heggen**
552. **Silas Marner by George Eliot**
565. **The French Quarter by Herbert Asbury**
569. **Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary by Funk and Lewis**
571. **Command Decision by William Wister Haines**
579. **Famous Artists and Their Models by Thomas Craven**
593. **The Call of the Wild by Jack London**
600. **The Big Sky by A. B. Guthrie, Jr.**
612. **Moby Dick by Herman Melville**
622. **The Pocket Book of Great Operas by Henry Simon & Abraham Veinus**
631. **Jean-Christophe by Romain Rolland**
657. **The Bishop's Mantle by Agnes Sligh Turnbull**
666. **The Girl on the Via Flaminia by Alfred Hayes**
679. **Peony by Pearl S. Buck**
684. **The Pocket Treasury of American Folklore by B. A. Botkin**
695. **Rhubarb by H. Allen Smith**
700. **Of Human Bondage by Somerset Maugham**
714. **The Asphalt Jungle by W. R. Burnett**
715. **The University of Chicago Spanish-English, English-Spanish Dictionary (Special—35c)**
718. **Great American Sports Humor by Mac Davis**
722. **Opus 21 by Philip Wylie**
723. **The Hearth and Eagle by Anya Seton**
728. **The Feather Merchants by Max Shulman**
729. **Chesapeake Cavalier by Don Tracy**
748. **Call It Treason by George Howe**

November, 1950

Thorne Smith

314. The Bishop's Jaegers
401. The Passionate Witch
409. The Glorious Pool
428. The Night Life of the Gods
447. Turnabout
479. Did She Fall?
490. Skin and Bones
518. The Stray Lamb
546. Rain in the Doorway

Faith Baldwin

456. District Nurse
513. Rehearsal for Love
658. Give Love the Air

Max Brand

250. Destry Rides Again
316. Fightin' Fool
509. The Stolen Stallion
523. The Longhorn Feud
547. Silvertip's Strike
609. Valley of Vanishing Men
634. Silvertip's Chase
687. Flaming Irons
705. Hired Guns
717. The Bandit of the Black Hills

Ellery Queen

17. The Chinese Orange Mystery
109. The Siamese Twin Mystery
134. The New Adventures of Ellery Queen
179. The Greek Coffin Mystery
227. The Egyptian Cross Mystery
270. The Devil to Pay
283. Calamity Town
313. The Tragedy of Y
326. There Was an Old Woman
459. The Dragon's Teeth

Craig Rice

237. Trial by Fury
289. Having Wonderful Crime
361. Home Sweet Homicide
651. The Fourth Postman

Erle Stanley Gardner

90. The Case of the Sulky Girl
263. The D.A. Calls It Murder
287. The D.A. Holds a Candle
334. The D.A. Draws a Circle
368. Murder up My Sleeve
378. The Case of the Perjured Parrot
407. The D.A. Goes to Trial
438. The Clue of the Forgotten Murder
464. The Case of the Rolling Bones
468. The Case of the Silent Partner
512. This Is Murder
544. The Case of the Turning Tide
561. The D.A. Cooks a Goose
590. The Case of the Haunted Husband
595. The D.A. Calls a Turn
619. The Case of the Empty Tin
643. The Case of the Drowning Duck
667. The Case of the Smoking Chimney
678. The Case of the Buried Clock
689. The Case of the Drowsy Mosquito
724. The Case of the Careless Kitten

Pocket Books

62. Pocket Book of Verse, M. E. Speare, editor
91. Pocket Book of Short Stories, M. E. Speare, editor
251. Ogden Nash Pocket Book
293. The Pocket Book of Western Stories, edited by Harry E. Maule
377. Pocket Book of Baby and Child Care, Benjamin Spock, M.D. (Special—35c)
383. Roget's Pocket Thesaurus
392. Pocket Book of Erskine Caldwell Stories, Henry Seidel Canby, editor
417. The Peter Arno Pocket Book
529. Pocket Book of American Poems, edited by L. Untermeyer
578. The Pocket Book of Old Masters, edited by H. J. Wechsler
650. French: Self-Taught Through Pictures, Richards, Ilsley, & Gibson (Special—35c)
661. Gods and Goddesses in Art and Legend, Herman J. Wechsler
677. The Pocket Book of Greek Art, Thomas Craven
682. Small Talk by Syms
708. The Pocket History of American Painting by James Flexner
720. Spanish: Self-Taught Through Pictures by Richards, Metcalf, and Gibson (Special—35c)
731. The Third Pocket Book of Crossword Puzzles by Margaret Petherbridge

If you cannot get certain POCKET BOOK titles you want from your dealer, order direct from POCKET BOOKS, *Inc., 18 West 48th Street, New York 19, N.Y., remitting 25 cents each plus 5 cents a copy for postage and wrapping.*

Printed in U.S.A.
November, 1950

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

POCKET BOOK

"GERTRUDE"
the Kangaroo trade mark appears only on *genuine* POCKET BOOK editions and is your guarantee of the best in reading.

In a parched land, the Sweetwater River ran so deep that it was almost useless. Then the big ranchers decided to build a dam. Only Ria Eaton came forward to protect the natural water rights of the small cattlemen. With neighbor against neighbor, the feud over the river threatened **BLOODSHED**

When Clark Tinsley came back to claim his lands he watched the fight grow. Then, with six-guns roaring, he went into action. Before peace returned to the Sweetwater, Clark was pitched headlong into an explosive fury of night rides and stampeding cattle that meant

DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

Front cover illustration by William Shoyer

POCKET BOOK *titles are chosen from the lists of all leading publishers. They bring you the world's best reading in editions of highest quality at the lowest possible price.*

THIS IS A GENUINE
POCKET BOOK

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

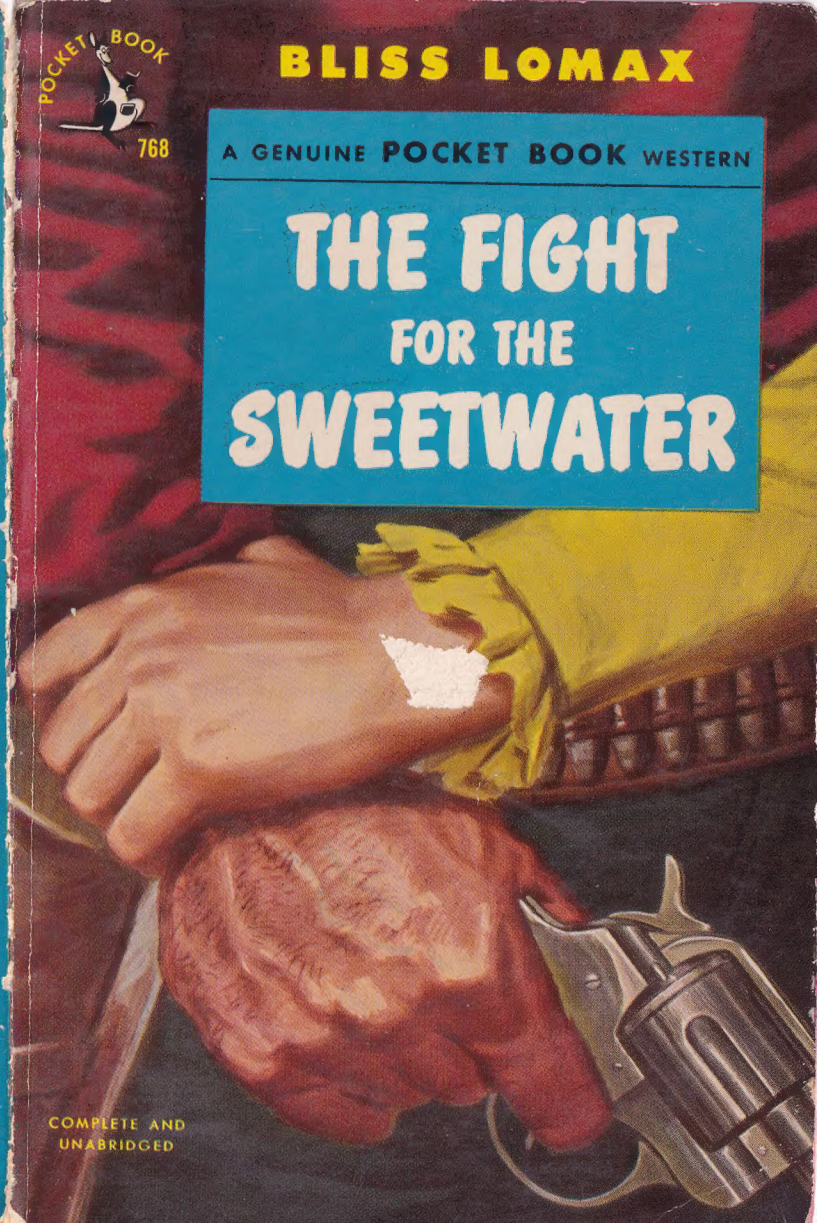
POCKET BOOK 768 THE FIGHT FOR THE SWEETWATER • BLISS LOMAX

POCKET BOOK 768

BLISS LOMAX

A GENUINE POCKET BOOK WESTERN

THE FIGHT FOR THE SWEETWATER



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED